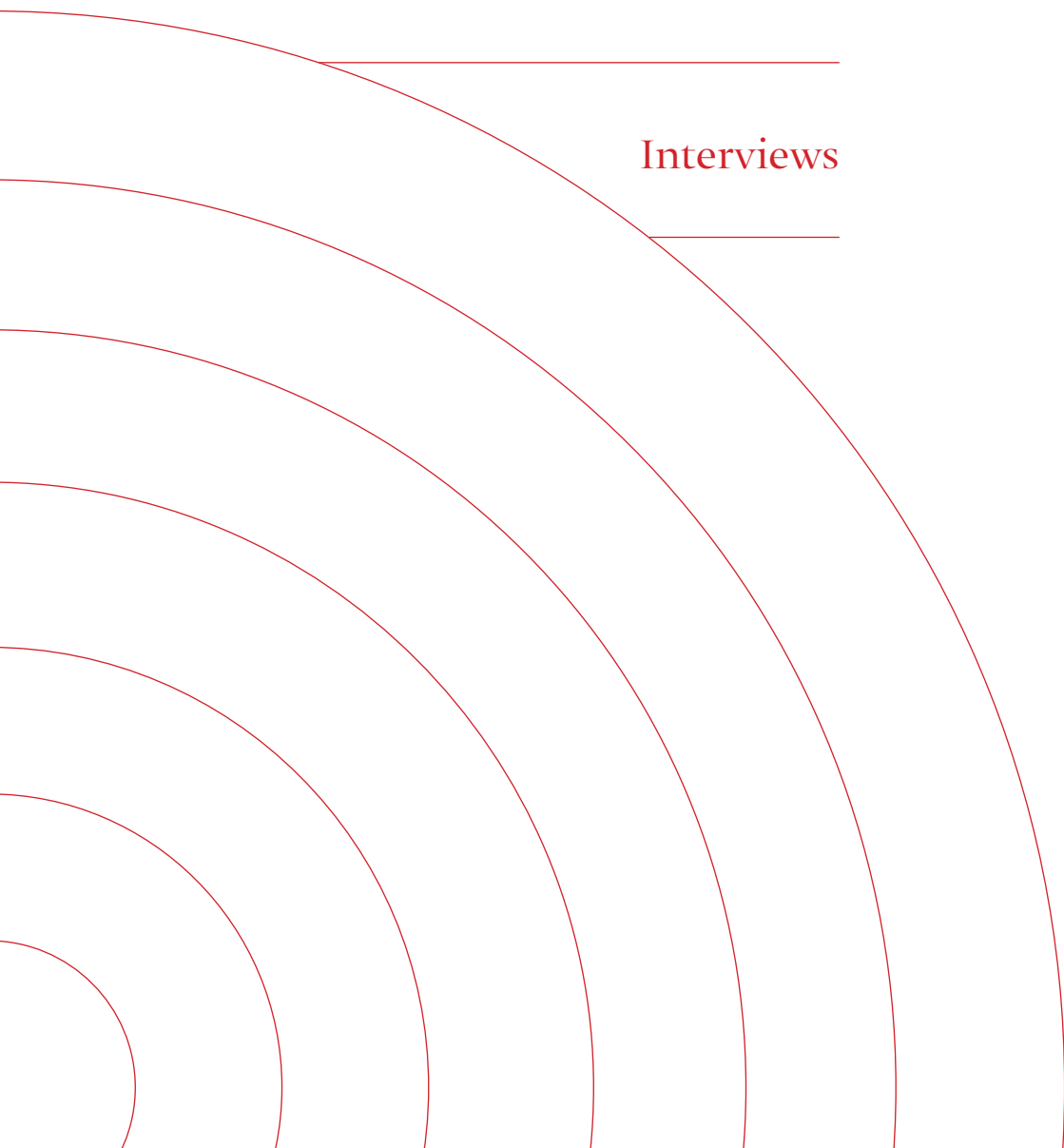


Art Archives Study

Before and after 2004

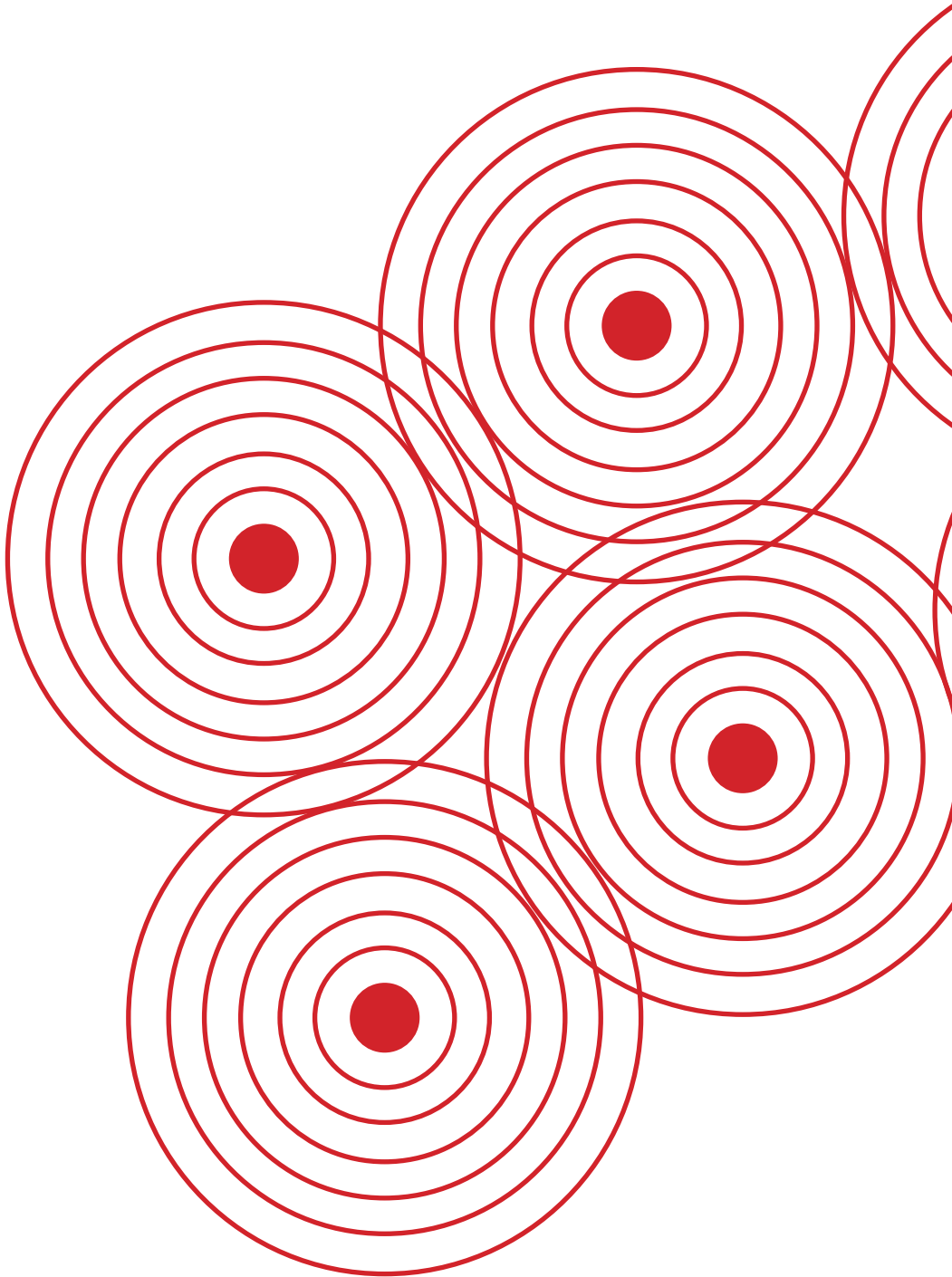
Interviews

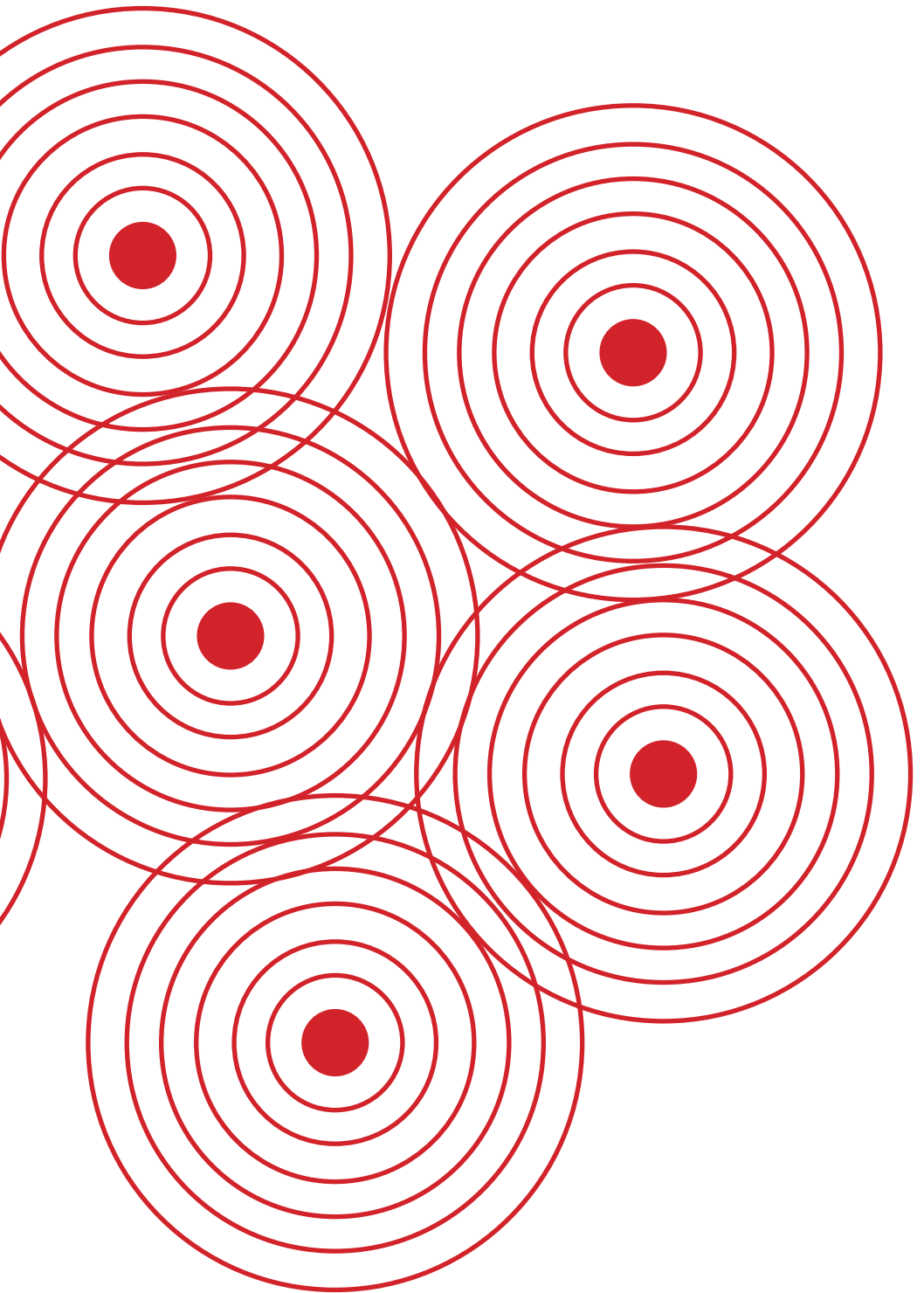


Art Archives Study

Before and after 2004

Interviews





Foreword

basis wien – Archive and Documentation Centre (Vienna, Austria), *The Archive of Fine Arts* (Prague, Czech Republic), and *Moderna galerija's Archives Department* (Ljubljana, Slovenia) – three archives of the visual arts of the 20th and 21st centuries and also partners in EAN, a wider network of European art archives that has been active since 2002 are collaborating in a two-year project entitled *ARTAS – Art Archives Study. Before and after 2004*.

For decades these three archives have collected, preserved, and made available documentation relating to the contemporary artistic production and its protagonists, writers, and venues in their respective countries, offering researchers and the interested public a wealth of information about the individual figures, institutions, and exhibitions of the art of the 20th and 21st centuries. All partners manage their respective comprehensive databases (Art and Research Database basis wien, abART, RazUme), which together contain data on more than 220,000 exhibitions and 330,000 individuals.

The year 2004, the period of the greatest enlargement of the European Union to date, serves as a starting point for the *ARTAS* project. With the accession of ten new member states, including the Czech Republic and Slovenia, the political, economic, and social relations among the states changed. The collaborative project examines the impact this historical moment had on contemporary art in the environments covered by the collected data. The explorations are based on the materials kept in the three archives, and the points where the three databases intersect.

In this booklet we present interviews conducted in 2023 and 2024. These interviews offer different perspectives on how collaboration and connections between artists, curators, and institutions have changed in the new circumstances.

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Interview with ZDENKA BADOVINAC on the Arteast 2000+ Collection, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana¹

Zdenka Badovinac is a curator and writer. She was director of the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana (1993–2020) and the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb (2022–2023).

She initiated the Arteast 2000+ collection and has curated numerous exhibitions of Slovenian and international artists. Her latest exhibition is the first major museum survey of Sanja Iveković, *Works of Heart (1970–2023)* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb (June 2023–January 2024) and her latest books are *Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe* (Independent Curators International, 2019), and *Unannounced Voices: Curatorial Practice and Changing Institutions* (Sternberg Press, 2022). Zdenka has been, among many other things, President of CIMAM, the International Committee of ICOM for Museums and Collections of Modern Art (2010–2013), and is one of the founders of the European confederation of museums L'Internationale.²

Zdenka, before we talk about the Arteast 2000+ collection, I would like to ask you about your beginnings as an exhibition curator at the Moderna galerija, Ljubljana (MG),³ where you

1 This interview was conducted in the framework of the 2nd ARTAS workshop, taking place in Ljubljana between 21 and 22 August 2023.

2 L'Internationale is a confederation of seven major European modern and contemporary art institutions and partners. L'Internationale proposes a space for art within a non-hierarchical and decentralized internationalism, based on the values of difference and horizontal exchange among a constellation of cultural agents, locally rooted and globally connected.

3 Badovinac's curatorial work includes: *Expressive Figuration, Slovene Artists* (1987, MG), *Experience of the Object. Young Slovene Artists* (1987, MG), *Silence - Contradictory Shapes of Truth* (including Mirko Bratuša, Pedro Cabrita Reis, Hubert Kiecol, Juan Munoz, Thomas Schütte, Ettore Spalletti, Jan Verduyck, Lujo Vodopivec, Rachel Whiteread, Erwin Wurm; 1992, MG), *The Sense of Order* (1996, MG) and *Body and the East - From the 1960s to the Present*, 1998, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana (the first thematic exhibition assembling Eastern European artists, with the participation of 80 artists from various countries of Eastern Europe).

initially curated a Western-oriented program especially for the Mala galerija venue in Ljubljana?⁴

I started with Slovene and a very Western style of artists, especially British sculpture at the end of the 1980s, and I think when I look back at my beginnings, I think it was actually not so much about importing something as it was about what I used to call authentic interest. I've always been very much in dialogue with the artists and listen to their interests, so it was imperative for me to follow their concepts and priorities. At the end of the 1980s there were two very strong artistic concepts. One was the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), and in 2015 I curated their retrospective,⁵ and another circle, the circle I defined, the circle of Marjetica Potrč. It was very much about an interest in the deconstruction of modernism. Marjetica Potrč was one of the most articulate artists from the very beginning. In her work, she very precisely deconstructed the autonomous idea of sculpture and art in general. She also had great theoretical knowledge and wrote a lot. At that time, MG published a magazine called *M'ars*⁶ and Marjetica Potrč published a lot of texts in it, like her interviews with Richard Deacon, Jože Barši, Dušan Zidar, just to mention a few of them. We all read her texts and she influenced a lot of artists. My idea at that time was to bring to Ljubljana the art that our artists were interested in. To create a dialogue. At that time, Igor Zabel,⁷ Lilijana Stepančič and I were three young curators working at the Moderna galerija and we shared the same ambition to work very internationally, although we were not as isolated as other Eastern European countries. But I have to say

4 Mala galerija was a small exhibition venue operated by the Moderna galerija, Ljubljana.

5 *NSK From Kapital to Capital. Neue Slowenische Kunst - an Event of the Final Decade of Yugoslavia*, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana (2015).

6 *M'ars* magazine was published by the Moderna galerija (Ljubljana) from 1989 to 2001.

7 Igor Zabel (1958–2005) was an art historian, curator and writer. He worked as a curator for the Moderna galerija, Ljubljana (1986–2005) and was, among other things, the coordinator of *Manifesta 3* (2000).

that the only serious international project of the Moderna galerija in times of socialism was the International Graphic Biennial in Ljubljana, founded in 1955.⁸

How did you get in touch with artists abroad?

As for the British artists, it was with the help of the British Council and Henry Meyric Hughes, who was the director of the British Council in London at the time. He was very interested in working with and supporting projects from Eastern Europe, which were very rare at the end of the 1980s. I spent some time in London at that time, where I met a lot of artists. Most of the major British sculptors. And I invited them to exhibit at Mala galerija in Ljubljana. I curated small exhibitions of Anish Kapoor, Richard Deacon, Alison Wilding, Tony Cragg.⁹ And it was not just about the exhibitions, but all the artists came to Ljubljana and I, together with my colleagues, organized the meetings, dinners and dialogues with the artists. It was very important for Slovenian artists to meet in person with artists who inspired them. But this story relates to my very beginnings at the end of the 1980s, at the start of the 1990s I met many people from the international scene, with whom we started to collaborate, and I also became part of a new generation in the international community that started developing new ways of international collaboration. But this is already a very long story.

8 The Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts is one of the oldest biennials in the world, and was founded in 1955.

9 In these years Badovinac curated exhibitions for the following artists, among others: Bill Woodrow, Marjan Gumilar, Alison Wilding (all 1989), Richard Deacon (1990), Magdalena Jetelova, Lujo Vodopivec, Željko Kipke (all 1991), Tony Cragg (1992), Cristina Iglesias (1993), Anish Kapoor, Božo Kemperle, Pedro Cabrita Reis (1994), Miroslaw Balka, Zvi Goldstein (all 1995), Michelangelo Pistoletto (1996), Ilya Kabakov (1997), Ingeborg Lüscher, and Haim Steinbach (1998).

You mentioned that the only serious international project of the Moderna galerija in those years was the International Graphic Art Biennial in Ljubljana. What was the situation with the collections of the Moderna galerija at the beginning of your directorship in the 1990s?

Moderna galerija, which was founded in 1948, was from the very beginning the principal national institution for modern and, I would say, contemporary art. It was the main institution in one of the former Yugoslav republics, which is also very important with regard to understanding the collection and the dynamics of how it was built. The main part of the collection at that time, and still today, is composed of Slovenian art from the 20th century. And then in 1955, MG founded the International Graphic Art Biennial, and started buying graphic art, and there were also donations. But in 1986 a new institution was established, the International Centre of Graphic Arts (MGLC).¹⁰ And then some of the works from the collections were moved there, some stayed in the Moderna galerija and are an important part of the collection, which still needs to be elaborated, probably in dialogue with International Centre of Graphic Arts.¹¹ We, as young curators at MG in the second half of the 1990s, really had a strong ambition to become part of the international art world. Now the idea of what's international has changed, but especially with the exhibition *Body and the East* in 1998,¹² the idea became more precise. We were also very much concerned with the critique of universality back in the 1980s, and the concept of the international as something universal also crumbled. The international became again something situated, something that is concrete and particular, and it speaks for itself, meaning it is not only an object of research from Western curators. For us the international became the former Yugoslav territory and

10 MGLC is a museum specializing in printmaking.

11 Badovinac mentioned the recent exhibition curated by Bojana Piškur, which included part of the Yugoslav collection: *Exercises in a Collection*, Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (+MSUM), Ljubljana (2023).

12 *Body and the East*, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana (1998), curated by Zdenka Badovinac.

the post-socialist world of Eastern Europe with which we share certain urgencies and priorities. We were very interested in the idea that the international art world is something that's not homogeneous, and it's something that's always changing, and that if we become an agent in the international dialogue, we can also influence international ideas about history, the world, society, and so on. And the idea of the Arteast 2000+ collection was very much about the continuation of what I started with Arteast 2000+. I defined this collection as a tool for international dialogues and more equality in the exchange of ideas. In 2010 we continued this principle of different internationalism with foundation of L'Internationale.¹³ For me there's still a lot of work to do to define and describe more extensively some of the ideas that I was interested in while being a director of the Moderna galerija.

How did you begin to build the Arteast 2000+ collection, what was the process of acquiring the artworks, how did you select the artists? Did you have committees in each country, someone to communicate with?

It all started with the exhibition *Body and the East* in 1998. The research took me a year, and it was conceived and selected together with the advisors from various Eastern European countries. The working method for the *Body and the East* exhibition and for the Arteast 2000+ collection was like this.

For *Body and the East* I created the concept and sent it to different advisors, and I think it was a very good idea that I contacted my colleagues from different Eastern European countries. I also travelled to meet all the advisers as well as the artists, and somehow I developed a long-term relationship with most of them. This research for the *Body and the East* exhibition helped me a lot to continue with Arteast 2000+. At the beginning, the idea was very much about the dialogue between the works of Eastern and Western artists, which was important for the first exhibition, but not so much for the next

Arteast 2000+ exhibitions. Later, I tried to define different aspects and the idea and concept of the collection as a tool, which I think is still very important today, and precisely this concept of the collection as a tool makes this collection so specific and different in comparison with similar collections that were formed later. For the Arteast 2000+ collection I used a smaller group of advisors: Piotr Piotrowski for Central European art, Viktor Misiano for former Soviet Russian art, Igor Zabel for former Yugoslav art, and Harald Szeemann for international Western art. Szeemann suggested Lawrence Weiner – which is now on the façade of +MSUM – and Jenny Holzer, as well as a few other artists. We bought a few works from René Block's collection. It is also interesting to see how the idea of the collection gradually changed from this dialogue concept to the idea of the collection as a tool. I think it's very important to note that it's a long period between 2000 and today, and it's very much about different shifts and different concepts, also related to how we can think about Eastern Europe or the socialist world and so on.

The first presentation of the Arteast 2000+ collection took place in June 2000 in an unrenovated building of a former army barracks in the town of Metelkova at the time of *Manifesta 3*.

When we started working on the Eastern art collection, it was almost at the same time as the production of *Manifesta 3*, which began in 1999. Igor Zabel, a curator of MG, became the coordinator of *Manifesta 3* and so was absent from his work at MG for a year. The curators of *Manifesta 3* wanted to have the exhibition in the Moderna galerija, and in fact in all the main museums and galleries in Ljubljana. So of course we reserved part of the venue for *Manifesta 3*.¹⁴ And then there was the question of where to present the Arteast 2000+ collection, and it was not so easy to find the space. The idea of using the unrenovated building as the main venue for the Arteast 2000+ collection came quite

14 The permanent exhibition was not dismantled, but there have been some interventions in it.

late. We even thought about Ljubljana Castle and then luckily and fantastically we decided to have it there, and I think it was a very good idea because it was a very good dialogue between the building and the artworks. The former Yugoslav army barracks building has its own history, and was given to MG in the mid-1990s to use for storage. It's a long story of how MG got it and the processes and struggles between 1994 and 2011, when the building was opened as the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (+MSUM). When the collection was installed there it was the first time that an international audience saw Eastern European art presented as a collective narrative, with all its problems, dilemmas and issues. I think it was an important presentation in many respects.

In the Arteast 2000+ collection we find artworks by some now very famous artists. Did the artists donate their works or did MG have a budget for the Arteast 2000+ collection?

Even before we dreamed of creating an Eastern art collection we collected some famous Western artists from our exhibitions. Some of the artworks were donated, but we bought most of them with the help of the City of Ljubljana and the Ministry of Culture. We bought works by Anish Kapoor, Jean-Marc Bustamante, the famous Portuguese artist Pedro Cabrita Reis and the Spanish Cristina Iglesias. The prices were really low compared to today's prices, especially for Kapoor. We bought it for 20,000 German marks, and today it is worth at least a million euros. Now you have an idea of how important these artworks are for the national collection from an investment point of view.

From today's perspective, would you say that Eastern European art is a historical period, or would you say that it still exists?

It's very different today than it was in the 1990s or early 2000s. I think the main difference is that the post-socialist countries are different in terms of material conditions than they were when we started working on Eastern European art. The main difference is that in the 1990s we had more in common than we do now. There were interests

that we shared. I have often mentioned in my texts that before the collapse of socialism no one used the term Eastern European art. It was coined afterwards for pragmatic reasons on both sides. The Western system wanted to have something new for the market, to show how open it was. But it was also very important for the East to have the term to give more visibility to what we were interested in. In the 1990s we were interested in Eastern European art, and the Irwin group was one of the first to deal with it, especially with the NSK Embassy in Moscow in 1992. They created something special, and I think it was one of the first events where the notion of Eastern European art was discussed from very different points of view. You know, does it even exist, is there an Eastern European art identity, and what does socialism mean in this context? There is a manifesto in the catalogue of the *Moscow Embassy*, where there's a statement that what we share is actually something more universal, and that's the idea of socialism. I often say that from the beginning, at least in Ljubljana, we were not interested in an Eastern European identity in any essentialist sense, but rather in the material conditions that we shared with other Eastern European countries. At that time there was no strong institutional support, no art system. And in many Eastern European countries it's still the same today. There's no institutional support. In the former Yugoslavia, it's even worse now than it was in Yugoslavia. The question of the market, the question of the school system and all these different aspects of the art system were somehow similar in all countries, but not only in Eastern Europe. I remember when I went to Brazil, we understood each other immediately because the situation was similar in terms of exclusion from the big international histories, which I treat an element of material conditions, of infrastructure. It's something that goes beyond the Western experience. Of course in the West you have poor artists, you have artists who never sell, you have artists who nobody has ever written about, but you know, there's a system that's built on something that is imagined and distributed as universal. The concepts of art were built in the West and then spread as universal all over the world. And when it comes

to Eastern European art, in the times of socialism modern art was understood as a provincial version of Western art and after the collapse of socialism as something that can use to talk about our Eastern Europeanness. So whatever we think about certain art or histories is related to the actual material conditions, which means among other things our position in the world. In 2016, together with the curator Bojana Piškur, I co-curated an exhibition at +MSUM called *Low-Budget Utopias*,¹⁵ which deals with these issues.

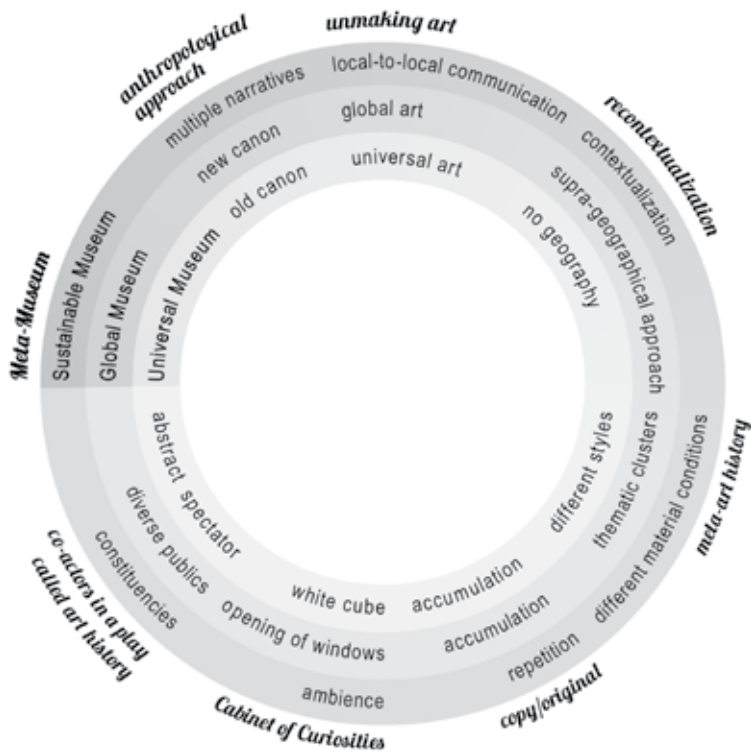


Figure: Zdenka Badovinac, *Three Museum Models and Meta-Museum by Walter Benjamin*, 2016.

15 *Low-Budget Utopias* (April–September 2016), *Low-Budget Utopias - First Recycling* (October 2016–January 2017), *Low-Budget Utopias - Second Recycling* (February–September 2017), all at +MSUM, Ljubljana.

How has the Arteast 2000+ collection affected the museum? For example, the position of the museum itself within the art scene, or in terms of the relationship between the collection and the idea, East and West, and has it helped the Moderna galerija to establish itself as an international institution with this focus?

I think the answer can be found in this concept of the collection as a tool, where it helps to think differently about the museum. What is the museum? What is its role? What can it do for the local community, for art? Is it just about promotion, or is it something else when it comes to international integration? The concept of collection as a tool teaches us how to think about internationality differently, beyond the model of promotion. It's very important to create a dialogue as a tool for learning from each other through working, instead of promotion, and so we started to use a concept of collaboration and the exchange of ideas and participation in international dialogues on an equal basis. This concept was also the basis on which we developed the idea of L'Internationale, and the Arteast 2000+ collection became a tool for very important international dialogues. And somehow I think that L'Internationale, the European confederation of museums, is a result of the 2000+ collection, in a very indirect and not very visible way. But the fact that MG already had the collection in 2011, and the new Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (+MSUM), which the Arteast 2000+ collection was the core of, was inspiring and also interesting for our international partners when they came to Ljubljana to discuss alternative models of cooperation. This wouldn't have been possible without the 2000+ collection. So I think this collection has played a crucial role in redefining another model of internationality that goes beyond the collaboration of partners from rich countries that do one big event after another. Our idea has been the inclusion of those who were previously excluded, and it actually went beyond this, as inclusion is not enough. The most important thing is that inclusion has an impact on that system which was previously exclusive, that it changes it. And I think this process is inevitable.

How important is the archive to your curatorial work or research, and do you think the archive supports the collections?

The archive is very important, and in MG we presented the idea of the importance of the archive through different presentations of the collection, where we included different archives of particular projects. In my last exhibition, a retrospective of one of the most important Croatian artists, Sanja Iveković, in Zagreb, Ivana Bago, the curator and theorist, conceived the archive of her work in relation to her first exhibition in the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb in 1976, the precursor of the present-day Museum of Contemporary Art.¹⁶ It was really fantastic to see all the documents on her work, exhibitions, the Zagreb art scene, media, video art, and so on, all mixed in with the artworks, it created a new narratives. I think the archive is extremely important, it's cross-generational, and I think it's also cross-narrative.

In 2004, when Slovenia became part of the European Union, there were many exhibitions focusing on Central and Eastern Europe. A lot of money was invested in collections by insurance companies and banks. Their focus was to invest in the East, in Eastern European art, for example the Generali Foundation, the Essl Collection, the Kontakt Collection. Some of this investment had a strong idea of branding behind it, how did you feel about that?

In my book, *Comradeship*,¹⁷ I wrote a text “Histories and their Different Narrators.” In that I was very interested in the idea that collecting is not just about the artworks. It's not about what you purchase and what you physically have. It's much more than that. For example, there is a crucial difference between the Arteast 2000+ collection and the Kontakt Collection. There are probably almost the same artists in

16 Sanja Iveković. *Works of Heart (1974–2023)*, Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb (June 2023–January 2024).

17 *Comradeship. Curating, art, and politics in post-socialist Europe*, New York: Independent Curators International, 2019.

the collections, but not the same motifs, and thus these two collections – though similar in terms of the artworks, are very different in terms of their aims. In the case of the Kontakt Collection,¹⁸ the very name points to the ambition to increase the dialogue between countries and cultures, which is of course a nice idea. But at the same time the ERSTE Foundation is an institution outside the specific context that it aims to stimulate a dialogue with, and thus as an instrument it doesn't act as a form of self-definition, an intention to create a situated dialogue with the world. In the case of MG, we wanted to be an agent of our own communication not only with and among Eastern European countries, but also with the rest of the world, and here the point of utterance is crucial, and in the end it is always about the question why and for whom we are doing certain things. We all have our own specific histories and urgent interests. For example, the former Yugoslavia's socialism was very different to Soviet socialism. It is well known that Tito split up with Stalin, and so we were not under Soviet domination, which was the case with most of the other Eastern European countries. And so it's understandable that Piotr Piotrowski and our colleagues from Central European countries like Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary have an idea of Eastern European art that's different to ours, one in which trauma is more important. For example, in the 1990s I think it was almost impossible for them to share the same interest in Russian art, like Moscow conceptualism, that we had. And today it's the same again, we're not on the side of those who want to cancel all Russian culture, though we also see it slightly differently now in terms of decolonial intentions coming from Ukrainians, and we all need to strive for historical justice as much as possible. Coming back to the Austrian exhibitions, I think there were different approaches at different times, and of course there were political and economic interests. You can't say it's all good or all bad. It's something between interest and good intentions, and genuine interest in neglected art in Eastern Europe.

18 In 2004, Erste Group founded an independent association with the aim of collecting and supporting Central and Eastern European artists, the Kontakt Collection.

I would like to end this interview with a quote from your text “What do we really want?”, published in the book *Arrivals* (2007):¹⁹ *“The contemporary art scene in Slovenia is finding more and more reasons to attune to the priorities of European cultural programs that are tolerant of diverse cultures. The future of art seems torn between the prevalent processes of homogenization, on the one hand, and the search for diversity on the other. Indeed, the world is becoming the same in terms of being in the grip of the forces of global capitalism. The question that arises is how to recognize difference within this sameness of context, and what to offer in the global exchange of ideas as the active otherness, as our particular virtues that we can bring to make this a better world.”* I think this quote is still very relevant after all these years. What do you think about it? Do you have anything to add?

All this is still true, it’s just that our resilience is weaker and we are more and more afraid of how we will be overwhelmed by artificial intelligence, of what will happen to our planet, and more and more anxious about war. Our work is therefore increasingly going beyond the work of experts, and museums are becoming places of ethical positions and tools for finding a way forward and also ways of preserving our humanity, which, as the genocide in the Gaza Strip demonstrates, is disappearing in front of our very eyes.

19 Book documenting a two-year exhibition program at Modern Art Oxford, Oxford and Turner Contemporary, Margate (2005–2007), conceived as a series of solo exhibitions presenting the work of artists from the ten new EU Member States.

Interview with VÍT HAVRÁNEK about Tranzit and the period around 2004¹

Vít Havránek is an art historian, art theorist and curator. He worked in the Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art in the National Gallery in Prague (1996–1998) and in the Prague City Gallery (1998–2002). From 2002 to 2019, he was a director of initiative for contemporary art Tranzit.cz. In 2007 he co-founded the space for contemporary art tranzitdisplay. Since 2019 he has been the Vice-Rector for Cooperation and International Activities at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague.

Tranzit.cz is an initiative for contemporary art founded in 2002 as a part of the tranzit.org network. Its goal is to contribute to the development of critical culture in a wider European context. Toward this end, tranzit.cz is engaged in numerous international projects and exhibitions. From 2007 to 2017, tranzit was a part of the project of the tranzitdisplay gallery in Prague. In 2017, tranzit.cz initiated the code of practice of the Feminist (Art) Institution, and in 2018 it established the Biennale Matter of Art, which is a member of the East Europe Biennial Alliance. ERSTE Foundation is the main partner of tranzit.cz.²

Can you tell us how tranzit started? Who was behind the project and how was it all connected to the Erste Bank?

At that time, Erste Bank had acquired Česká spořitelna, the largest Czech bank.³ This acquisition occurred prior to the initiation of tranzit. Erste Bank had always been a sponsor of the Secession in Vienna, and as culturally educated patrons, they believed it might be interest-

1 The interview was conducted as part of the 3rd ARTAS workshop, taking place in Prague between 30 November and 1 December 2023.

2 <https://cz.tranzit.org> (accessed 15.7.2024).

3 In August 2000, Erste Bank became a 52% shareholder of Česká spořitelna. By 2002, Erste bank increased its share to 98%. In 2018, Erste Group Bank AG became the sole shareowner.

ing to bring similarly radical contemporary art manifestations from Vienna to Prague. That was the initial momentum.

The institutional form of tranzit was significantly influenced by three personalities: Mária Hlavajová⁴, Kathrin Rhomberg⁵, and Boris Marte⁶. Kathrin Rhomberg was associated with the Secession at that time. She and Mária Hlavajová suggested that bringing an existing exhibition to Prague might seem somewhat colonialist, and they proposed developing an institution more promising for the future. They defined the general mission of the organization, which Boris Marte, representing the sponsor, understood and supported. It was necessary to look for local collaborators to fill this general framework with specific programs. This is when I was asked to get involved. The project began in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. As program directors, we proposed the program that the founding directors (Tomáš Pospiszyl⁷ and Jiří Ševčík⁸), the head of the sponsoring department, and the International Board commented on and voted for.

4 Mária Hlavajová is a Slovak art historian and curator. Since 2000, she has been founder and director of BAK, basis voor actuele Kunst in Utrecht. Between years 2008–2016 she was a researcher and artistic director of Former West. She designs international art theory projects, symposiums, and lecture series.

5 Kathrin Rhomberg is a Vienna-based independent curator. She is a co-curator of Former West and corresponding member of Secession, Vienna. Between 2002–2007 she was a director of the Kölischer Kunstverein.

6 Boris Marte was on the managing board of ERSTE Foundation between 2008 and 2012, then again since 2016. In 2021 he became the CEO of ERSTE Foundation.

7 Tomáš Pospiszyl is a Czech art historian and curator of modern and contemporary art. He worked as a curator in the National Gallery in Prague (1997–2002). He is a lecturer at the Centre of Audiovisual Studies at FAMU (since 2003) and at the Academy of Fine Arts (since 2012) where he is also head of Department of Art theory and history.

8 Jiří Ševčík was a Czech art theorist, curator and pedagogue. He was a main curator in the Prague City Gallery (1989–1993), director of the Collection of Modern Art at the National Gallery in Prague (1993–1996), lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts (1995–2013); cooperated with Gallery MXM, Austrian Cultural Forum, and was a member of the international jury for the Essl Award and the initiative Tranzit.org.

How did it work? Was there some kind of institution or office?

The structure was somewhat unusual. The bank provided funding to a civic association, created by local experts and artists but including the bank's representatives. This association comprised around six to eight members, including bank personnel. Then, the association's committee would then review and decide on the programs proposed by executive directors. At the time, it was a model that offered a "risky" amount of freedom and was based on great trust in individual abilities. This was mainly because the financial support did not have any restrictive thematic priorities or evaluation criteria for us. Tranzit was an organism in the process of development, driven by debates with artists of different generations, focuses and nationalities. The program arose from connections with their worlds and values. It is also important to mention that Mária Hlavajová previously served as the director of the Soros Centre in Bratislava. The original tranzit programme was influenced by her experience with the Soros Foundation, in a way being a little bit more advanced, and thus a bit more critical, about what Soros did.

How strong was the connection of the Czech tranzit to Austria and to the tranzits in other countries? Did you collaborate on the program? And which countries are we talking about?

At first, it was Prague and Bratislava. Later, it started in Austria and Hungary, with Romania being the last. With the program, we had complete freedom in what to do; it really depended on each tranzit to propose the program. At the beginning, the idea was that it would be something ephemeral, really. This was the wish of Kathrin Rhomberg and Mária Hlavajová, that tranzit should be ephemeral in the sense that it should challenge the existing Western institutional model with permanently established cultural institutions like museums and galleries. Besides the possibility to flexibly develop and change the program, the main potential of tranzit was, and still is, its exceptional competence to expertly navigating the five countries of Central

Europe. If you think about it, no other organization, not even the world's largest museums, offers such competence to this day.

Did you meet regularly with other tranzits?

Yes, we met on various occasions several times a year. Additionally, we met at least once a year with the colleagues, founders and bank representatives.

What was the reason for initiating the tranzit organization also in Hungary and Romania?

I think it can be seen simply as an economic operation. Erste Bank was acquiring banks in these countries. However, as the Austrian economy shows, it did not operate completely thoughtlessly (i.e., the invisible hand of the free market). The territory of Austrian economic development and expansion after 1989 coincides with the cultural space of the former Austria-Hungary. We can argue whether economics follows culture or vice versa.

How did the cooperation with the bank itself work?

When tranzit started, I think we felt a certain direct responsibility towards the bank's employees and certain company values. I thought it would be beneficial to cultivate an appreciation for contemporary art among them as a form of reciprocity. However, given that tranzit was not intended to support mainstream art practices and forms, we understood that our activities were not so appealing.

Also, as an East European, it seemed to me that the relationship with the sponsor somehow reflected a specific Viennese tradition of self-criticality, where art is given freedom and even expected to critique its sponsors. This approach is quite distinctively Viennese; similar patterns were observed with other companies like Generali and Bawag. They allowed for this open critical perspective both internally and externally.

Did they sometimes interfere with your proposals?

Only at the beginning. There was always some tension between the Austrian bank and the local Czech bank. The funds were actually provided by the local banks, which was part of the strategy to involve local managers in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary... These managers often did not understand what we were doing, while at the same time, they gave their corporate sponsorship to such events as, for example, Miss Fitness. This led to occasional clashes with the local banks.

But the headquarters in Austria did support you.

Yes, the representative of the parent bank always acted in accordance with the declared separation of tranzit's artistic program from the economic or marketing interests of the bank. It was also a tool for them to influence the mindset of their employees here.

Are there still people from the bank in the association?

Formally, yes, they are still part of the association. However, the composition has changed over time. The majority of the members are now arts professionals, including artists and curators. Currently, only one or two representatives from the bank remain in the association.

Do you remember some other independent institutions supported by private money in Europe which focused on contemporary art?

I must say that what was and still is truly exceptional about tranzit is its regional focus, spanning four or five countries, and its declared affinity for the tradition of experimental and critical art from the sixties and seventies. This uniqueness made it quite successful and interesting to other countries as well, including Germany, France, Belgium, and the United States. It makes much more sense to approach the whole region collectively rather than working with separate countries and nationalities individually.

Who were the other people in the Czech tranzit team?

Initially, I worked alongside Anna Hrabáková, who is a producer. Vjera Borozan⁹ joined later. Additionally, there was a board consisting of Tomáš Poszpiszyl and Jiří Ševčík. Afterwards, we joined the exhibition and discursive program with the Display association, which consisted of David Kulhánek, Tomáš Svoboda, Ondřej Chrobák, and Zbyněk Baladrán. We created a joint exhibition program, which we successfully continued with Zbyněk Baladrán for several more years.

Did tranzit have a curatorial team?

Tranzit is run by a board of directors. At the time, the team included Georg Schöllhammer, Dóra Hegyi, Boris Ondreička. Before Boris Ondreička, Vlado Beskid was the first director of the tranzit team.

What was your first activity or event?

As I remember, it was a mix of scientific approaches to various aspects of city life and development, combined with viewing the everyday through fictitious artistic performances. It may be seen as a variation on Debord's *dérive*. People experienced the city differently through art performances, where Jesper invited scientists, sociologists, and ornithologists, along with incorporating some fictitious stories.

Was the overall focus on Czech contemporary art? Or international art?

I would say the focus was international, rather than specifically Czech. The idea of what constituted internationality in the 2000s was different from today, and the strategy was adapted over time. Initially, the approach was related to the notion of globalization and diversity as it appeared in the 1990s. Over time, I began translating a series of postcolonial books and anthologies while tranzit, along with

9 Vjera Borozan was part of Tranzit.cz in 2005–2011. She is an art historian, pedagogue and curator. Between 2011 and 2019, she was a director of the internet platform Artyčok TV. Since 2019, she has been teaching contemporary art and 19th century art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague.

the Display collective, conceived a corresponding exhibition program. We were also curious about implementing post- and de-colonial perspectives in Eastern Europe.

On the other hand, while tranzit has always produced and collaborated internationally, we presented artists from the Central/Eastern European region in which it was anchored. After I left, Tereza Stejskalová, the new head of tranzit in Prague, decided to expand wider regional links through the East Europe Biennale Alliance (Budapest, Kiev, Prague, Warsaw).

Can you imagine having an institution like this in 2004 without the support of Erste Bank?

An institution like this on its own?

No. And I can even say that even now, because I work for the public sector. There is still no comparison between what one can achieve with relatively small amounts of private or privately controlled money compared to public funds. It might sound very neoliberal, but it is true that this kind of funding allows you to do things that are more interesting, risky, and flexible than what public funds or grants typically allow.

The problem is that with the grant money, one has to apply every year, it's not secured. So, you need a certain stability that comes from elsewhere than from the grant.

And what about the year of 2004, the year of the entry of the EU. Were there some changes, how did you experience it?

I think there are a couple of things to consider. When we look at the 90s and the post 90s period, we were a generation experiencing liberalization in two senses: the end of censorship and the vastly greater access to international culture, which was a significant advance.

The second aspect was the neoliberal privatization of industries, agriculture, services, and properties. At the time, there was little interest or critical understanding of privatization among our generation. We were solely focused on the cosmos of culture and doing things within

this space, only realizing later, when it was too late, what was happening with the economic base. Indeed, tranzit was a unique model of how an economically powerful actor could support what were then culturally “alternative” values and attitudes. What if it had not been the exception but had become the rule?

We, or I, used to think in 2004 that only artistic strategies would guarantee the conditions for art to be a social avant-garde. Today, I would say that this must be complemented by an awareness of how the economy works. If you mention entry to the EU, I think that at the time we were convinced that it was possible to change people’s behavior through art and imagination, and the enlargement of the EU was precisely such a positive change in the size of the arena where this change could take place.

Do you remember what tranzit.cz did in 2004?

We did a big event in 2004. It was a significant symposium *Authentic Structures*, centered around a book edited by L. Hoptman and T. Pospiszyl, published by MoMA in 2002 under the title *Primary Documents*. This book served as a sourcebook for Central and Eastern European art since the 1950s. We invited around 40 guests and held a major symposium at the Kampa Museum. Tranzit invited around 40 historians, artists and curators to observe and comment on how East European art may enter global or canonical history.

Interview with JANA INTIHAR FERJAN about the Archives Department of the Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

Jana Intihar Ferjan worked as a curator in the Archives Department of the Moderna galerija (Ljubljana) between 1983 and 2024. The task of the Archives (established in 1971) is to carry out systematic and continuous work focused on the archival materials and press clippings collection of Slovenian visual artists and exhibition spaces.

Jana, can you tell us more about the Archives and why it was established?

The Archive Department is only one part of the larger institution of the Moderna galerija, established in 1947 as a national museum of modern art. The Department of Documentation – Archives, Bibliography was established later, in 1971 under the director Zoran Kržišnik,¹ in collaboration with the Ljubljana Academy of Fine Arts and the Association of Slovenian Fine Arts Societies. But when I came here, in 1983, the Slovenian Association of Fine Arts Societies and the Academy of Fine Arts were not active anymore in this field. Kržišnik, who was still the director, had no feeling for the work we were performing, but he had an amazing feeling for the trends in the art-world, and was in contact with the leading museum directors and curators. The lists of those invited to sit on the juries of the Ljubljana Graphic Biennale are a good example of his contacts.

Going through some materials in our archive, the connections between Kržišnik and the Nuremberg Biennale [Biennale Nürnberg, established in 1969, with another edition in 1971] attracted my attention, but I have had no time to make a study of this. Any such

¹ Zoran Kržišnik (1920–2008) was a Slovenian art historian and critic. From 1957 to 1986 he was the director of the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana. He was one of the founders and for many years the director of the International Graphic Art Biennale in Ljubljana, which started in the Moderna galerija and in 1986 moved to the newly established International Center of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana.

research would also have to consider the Institut für moderne Kunst in Nuremberg, and its role as a modern center of documentation, which was established in 1967.

There were also connections with the Department of Artistic Documentation in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, which opened in October 1965.

Could you tell us about your early days in the Archives and how the work was organized back then?

Joining the department in 1983, I tried to continue with the work as it had first been conceived: in brief, it consisted of following the activities of exhibition venues in Slovenia and of Slovenian artists and curators, and compiling art-historical bibliographies. One must remember here that at the time information was not as easily accessible as nowadays. Since the beginning the results of our work have quite often been published: either as documentary material in the catalogues of the retrospective exhibitions staged by the Moderna galerija, or in the form of the lists of exhibitions and other happenings in Slovenia in the field of visual arts in art magazines. Unfortunately, the magazines *M'ars* and *Sinteza* were discontinued, and our fight for 'open data access' continued. We always had as one of our goals providing our researchers with reliable information. And in this project we were really kind of a self-made team.

For a short period after 1986, when Jure Mikuž was the director, our department flourished. He strongly supported us by letting us start building software programs of our own after the situation in the wider European scene was researched. We also got a third person to work in the department at that time.

What were the reasons for developing the RazUme database?

In the 1988 the Ministry of Culture of Slovenia decided to buy computers for all the museums in Slovenia. At first we didn't even dare to turn them on, but we felt that they could be a very useful tool for us. We started to research how to begin working on computers and if there

was any software which could help us. Of course, in Slovenia, which in those days was still part of Yugoslavia, we didn't find anything. We went to, I remember, a CIDOC conference in Cambridge, where we learned that we were not a museum documentation department, but an archive. The software supporting museum documentation was presented to us there (and was also purchased by some Slovenian museums), but it was not suitable for our use. We also visited the Soros Center in Budapest, which had just started its work then. We learned that their way of working was very similar to ours, but they were not even thinking about digitizing their data at the time.

The two curators in the Archives then – me and Eva Gspan – even enrolled in a programming course in our search for solution. At that point a young IT engineer, Tomo Kokalj, took an interest in our work. We spent a lot of time together talking about things and narrowing down our different concepts of work, and as a result in 1989, an application called Razstava (Exhibition) came into use, which kept track of the exhibitions in Slovenia and those of Slovenian artists abroad. Being satisfied with the results we continued our work, and in 1991 the Umetnik (Artist) application followed, processing data on artists, their biographies and bibliographies. We joined the two into RazUme, a program which is still running and which gets new data every day. We thought that we'd made something good, so I informed the professional public about our achievements by publishing information in various art and museum magazines, but there was no interest. There was even a CIDOC conference in Ljubljana in 1993 and I made a presentation about this program there, with no results.

basis wien (sic) and the Archives started working together in 2000 within the framework of the EU project *Vektor*.² Could you tell us more about this cooperation?

2 The initiator of the EU-funded research project *Vektor - European Contemporary Art Archives (2000-2003)* was basis wien. The founding partners of the project, which aimed to create a common database on contemporary art that could be continuously and systematically updated, were institutions in the EU member states. The project continued with the establishment of the platform *European.art.net* (EAN).

It was 1998, when Igor Zabel popped into my office and said something like: “Hey, I met Lioba Reddeker.³ basis wien are doing exactly what you’re doing – try and make contact with her.” So in April 1998 I wrote Lioba a letter, and I soon got an answer from her. Then the next April 1999 I visited basis wien for the first time, and there our work was immediately understood and accepted. That was how our connection began. So Lioba obviously remembered us when the *Vektor* project was starting, supported with Culture 2000 European funds. We couldn’t be a member of this association, because Slovenia was not yet a member of the European Union, but she invited the Moderna galerija as a guest. So I joined a *Vektor* meeting in Vienna. It was the second meeting of the project, the first one having happened in Leipzig. I went and presented our work at several meetings – I remember one in Bolzano, Italy – but this one in Vienna in March 2001 was very important for us, because Lioba connected me with Kulturkontakt Austria who gave us some financial support. And with this we were able to put our data online as soon as autumn that same year. That was, I think, persuasive for basis wien, as we proved we were serious with our work. We were not so lucky, though, when the Moderna galerija decided to build its own webpage, as our system collapsed and our software was said to be the cause of the problems because it was technically obsolete.

And by the way, when reading the programs of the meetings I found out that I was not the only one there who was in the following European-art.net (EAN) group, as Kathrin Mayer⁴ and Claudia Jolles⁵ were also at the meetings, while from Prague there was Jiří Ševčík.⁶

3 Lioba Reddeker (1961–2011), curator, writer, researcher, founder of basis wien – Archive and Documentation Centre.

4 Kathrin Mayer, Deputy Director of the Institut für moderne Kunst in Nuremberg.

5 Claudia Jolles, editor of Kunstbulletin, Zurich.

6 Jiří Ševčík (1940–2022), then professor at the AVU in Prague.

Your Archives soon started another EU project, called *Gravity*, in 2002. What can you say about that?

When the *Vektor* project ended and a publication was issued, the Moderna galerija's director Zdenka Badovinac forwarded to our department an invitation for collaborating in another European partnership. We made an application from our point of view and the project was accepted. Its title was *Gravity – Arts, Religion, Science*. It was led by Kulturzentrum bei den Minoriten Graz.⁷ The fact is that nothing is left of this project except our part, which was an online exhibition that is still on our webpage, as well as the catalogue with texts and an essay by Igor Zabel. Some technical renovations for the RazUme database were also carried out to support a virtual exhibition.

When this project was finished, I got an email from Lioba in November 2005. She invited us to the EAN. We did not have our database online, but she still invited us because she knew us, knew our work. She also visited us and we became partners of the EAN, which we are still today.

EAN⁸ links archives and their respective databases through a search engine and provides information on artists, their activities, presentations in museums or galleries. The network of partners continues to grow, and every year EAN partners and guests have meetings, so I wondered if you could tell us more about the themes of the early meetings?

At the beginning there were meetings in Vienna, in 2005, 2006 and 2007. In 2008, it was supposed to be in Prague, but there were obviously problems in Prague, because that idea was then dropped and it was once again in Vienna. Then in 2009 it was in Zurich for the first time, where it was also held in 2011.

If I remember it correctly, in 2011 basis wien left the strategic committee because Lioba Reddeker died. And at the same time the Swiss

7 The international project *Gravity – Arts, Religion, Science (2002-2005)*, which was financially supported by the Culture 2000 programme, brought together eight partners <http://zerogravity.mg-lj.si> (accessed 15.7.2024).

8 <https://european-art.net/database> (accessed 15.7.2024).

Institute for Art Research offered to pay one person who could use 10 hours per month to do administration for EAN. This was Edith Krebs, and she did this for five years. I think the network really benefited from having one person to take care of everything. In the beginning it was much more complicated, because some technical standards were required to actually join the network. In recent years we got some partners with newer databases than ours, and the process now goes quite quickly.

Our meetings were going well with exchanges of information on our workflows and different practices, which actually turned out to have much in common. We were all meeting new people, learning about new archives and their practices, which could then enrich our own. How to move towards the more effective presentation and exchange of data, those were the main topics of our meetings.

Why did the Moderna galerija's Archives decide to join the EAN so early on?

Our wish was to get the support we lacked at home.

Do you have any ideas or suggestions on how the EAN could develop in the future among professionals and archives working in a similar way?

I don't know, I would like that the network keeps its informal form, because meeting friends has really helped over the years. Now we're a brand, and I think that the brand should be cultivated with care. I hope that if there would always be someone like Gerold Ritter for technical support. For me the EAN was really very important – for my work, for inspiration, for having goals, for implementing some new ideas, like using VIAF numbers, and so on. In those years all these things were very helpful for us. I hope the next generation finds EAN supportive and enriches it with new ideas. But I also think the younger generation should decide how it develops in the future.

What is your vision for the Archives, where do you see it going from here?

If our database can maintain and even improve connections with other databases in our micro-world and internationally, then the work could become affordable. Connections should also become more effective, bring more, and be visibly more attractive to users. RazUme could also connect with the museum documentation program, and maybe we should take more care about our own brand – RazUme – which over the years has now implanted itself in people's minds.

One last question. Slovenia and the Czech Republic joined the European Union in 2004. Do you think that joining the EU had any influence on the development of the Archives and your work? For example, you said that you were initially unable to become a partner in the EU project called *Vektor*.

We were associated at first. But no, I don't think joining the EU had a great impact, because we already had all these connections settled. The ability to be a full partner in those projects, this is the only great change I can mention.

Did you also benefit from getting some funding? In other words, was the renovation of the Moderna galerija building and the archive space related to EU funding?

Yes, it was, but it was a part of the renovation of the whole Moderna galerija, which was funded by the Norwegian Grants. But there was no direct impact of EU funding that was strictly connected to our work.⁹

9 The interview was conducted as part of the 2nd ARTAS workshop, taking place in Ljubljana between 21 and 22 August 2023.

Interview with HANS KNOLL on mobility between Vienna/Budapest/Bratislava and Russia in the art scene from the perspective of a gallery owner¹

Hans Knoll founded the Knoll Gallery in Vienna in the mid-1980s and the Knoll Gallery in Budapest in 1989, the latter being the first private commercial gallery to operate in the Eastern Block that still exists. He is the curator of several international exhibitions, often focusing on Central and Eastern Europe. Between 1995 and 1999 he taught art management at several universities in Vienna, Vilnius and Bucharest, and since 2006 he has been teaching at the University of Music in Vienna. He is the author of the book *The Second Advertising – Art in 20th Century Hungary*. Since 1990 he has been organising art tours in Budapest, Bratislava, Moscow, St. Petersburg and Bucharest. In 2000 he was appointed Federal Curator of Austria for the EXPO 2000 in Hanover.²

Hans Knoll, we are meeting in your gallery located on Gumpendorfer Strasse in Vienna's 6th district. Can you tell us about the exhibition you are showing at the moment and how it connects to the history of your gallery?

This is the exhibition by Slovak artist Otis Laubert³, who is 77 years old now. I discovered him back in the Eastern Block years, when he was living with his sister in a small house close to the main station in Bratislava. He was a non-official artist, off, he was not accepted, he was not participating in the socialist exhibition circus. But in his little

1 This interview was conducted as part of the first ARTAS workshop, held in Vienna from 3 to 4 April 2023.

2 <https://web.archive.org/web/20230605055749/https://moldarte.eu/hans-knoll/> (accessed, 15.7.2024).

3 Otis Laubert (b. 1946 in Valaska) belongs to the founding generation of Czechoslovak conceptual artists. He lives in Bratislava.

house, he had a space where he completed installations, it was quite rotten, but he covered it with paper. Some mutual friends of ours pointed it out to me and so I saw the installation “Outsiders” in early 1989. He was using old things which people had thrown out, things he found in flea markets, in shops, used things. These objects were hanging more or less at eye-level. And it was so amazing, miraculous, to walk through this installation, and to get close to such an object, to another one. That was like telling a big story. This was still during socialism. And suddenly after the collapse of the Iron Wall many important curators came to me, because it was very difficult to communicate with institutions, museums, in the former socialist countries, they still were not prepared, nobody was prepared to communicate. And so, for example, Christos M. Joachimides,⁴ a well-established curator from London, came to me with a colleague, and they said, they were preparing a big show in Berlin, at the Gropius Bau, and wanted me to recommend someone to them. Now in that situation — it was still ‘89 — they needed to include Eastern European artists. So I named some artists, which I also did for the documenta curators and other institutions. With Otis, there was only little material and they said, now come on, where are the catalogues by these artists? But these artists did not have catalogues. It was completely impossible for them to have been able to produce catalogues. These curators said, they do not exhibit artists who don’t have catalogues. And I said, okay, then this is the wrong place for you, I am sorry. That was a bit rude but it convinced them, and they immediately invited him to this show. And they made him — Otis — to a big superstar in the exhibition.⁵ So Otis came immediately into the spotlight. And he liked it, but he was also shocked. He was not used to it. And that led to the situation where he was withdrawing again, back into his space. So when

4 Christos M. Joachimides, (b. 1932 in Athens, d. 2017 in Athens) was an art historian and curator who curated numerous notable exhibitions, among them: *A new Spirit in Painting* (1981) at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, *Zeitgeist* (1982) at the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin, and *Metropolis* at the same location in 1991.

5 *Metropolis*, Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin (20. 4.–21. 7. 1991).

I wanted to schedule exhibitions at my gallery here or in Budapest, he always said, ah, I have an exhibition in the cultural house in Kosice, so we have to postpone the exhibition at your gallery. And that went on for several years. And then I said, “okay, Otis, it’s obvious. I’ll leave you alone because I do not want to offend you.” I visited him from time to time, we stayed in contact over all these decades. And now we decided to do an exhibition, just to have him back on the map. When I said, he was shy, or that he was shocked, that happened with a good many artists.

**Can you tell us a little bit more about your beginnings?
How did you become, interested in Czech, Slovak and
Hungarian artists?**

Well, I studied architecture but did not finish, because I started the gallery during my studies. For a year I was living in a space without water, without a toilet, everything outside in the courtyard. I didn’t have any money. And I started a project: Every Wednesday I organised dinners for friends. I showed friends’ artworks, installations, music, films. So I had to learn what a gallery and an artist and the artworks need. I started from nothing. And then I said, it’s finished. And they said, “no, no, please. We need a space.” And so I learned step by step what a gallery needs. And I had learned that a gallery has to create a new and unique programme. Just like an artist produces unique artworks. That was in the early second half of the eighties. In Vienna, in this district. It was the time when the Neue Wilde⁶, the young wild artists, didn’t have so much power anymore. And also the art market collapsed in some periods. So the galleries started to deal with editions, multiples, in the late eighties. Some of the artists were really superstars with multiples. With a growing market. But, I couldn’t participate in that, it didn’t interest me. So I discovered that behind the Iron Curtain, there were interesting artists. I start-

6 The term Neue Wilde was used in Germany for “a movement which saw the re-emergence of expressive painting in the late 1970s and 1980s.”, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/n/neue-wilde> (accessed 15.7.2024).

ed to visit artists who were non-official artists, who made their own presentations. They invited their friends into their little studios to show their works. And I was guided from one hand to the other. There were no phones, nothing. The life was so calm, under socialism, that everyone knew where the friend, the other artist, was at a particular time on a Friday afternoon. And I could easily see nine studios in one afternoon in Bratislava, without making any appointments beforehand. And from this experience, also in other countries, came the idea to start a gallery. Still, under socialism, as a foreigner I could not open a company. But, I did it with the help of friends. I asked five artists to start an artists' association in Hungary. Why Budapest? Budapest was by far the most open to the West. We opened in September 1989. Still under socialism. And I wanted to give a sign to the art scene locally and internationally. I didn't want to get connected to socialist realism and such things, so I studied the last decades of Eastern European artists and art history. I discovered that there was a period in the late 20th century, from the second half or late '60s to the early years of the '70s, where non-official or semi-official artists could travel abroad and participated in big exhibitions with Bruce Nauman and so on. I wanted to connect to this. I invited conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth who was on the peak of his career then, and to my surprise, he immediately answered, "yes, of course, I am in." And so I brought him to Hungary to show him the space. He made it, he prepared an installation.⁷

We talked about how we needed something to be sellable for prices for people in Hungary. He asked my assistant what could, let's say, an art teacher pay for a print in an edition of 100? And she said, well, probably 1,000 Forint, which was about 15 Euros. And he laughed and said, "yeah, come on, you know, my editions in New York cost almost 1,000 dollars."

7 The German art magazine *Kunstforum* published an interview with Hans Knoll and Joseph Kosuth to coincide with the opening of the Knoll Galéria Budapest exhibition *Lukacs — Wittgenstein* by Joseph Kosuth. See: 'He accepts all currencies...' in *Kunstforum International*, vol. 105, Jan/Feb 1990.

Suddenly, during an evening, the idea was there: We were selling for 1,000 units in the currencies of the buyers. So the buyers had to show their ID and could only buy one work. And that was such a success, the people went crazy. One and a half months later, the Iron Curtain collapsed. People were mad about what we were doing. They came from Czechoslovakia, from South Poland, and so on. The gallery was totally overcrowded. We sold almost everything. I only stopped it to keep something for the archives and to make donations to museums. And since then, the gallery is still running in that square, one of the main squares in Budapest.⁸ Of course, in the beginning there were no real collectors. It was a very slow start. I noticed that not only the gallery and the artists needed to participate in international shows. I understood that also the people who are interested in art have to see examples of what it means to live with art. In offices, in flats, and in society. So I started to invite them to join us travelling to Art Cologne and other art fairs. I introduced them to collectors and to buyers. And I took them with us when we were delivering artworks around Cologne. So they could see that in villages between the cow fields, there were offices or flats with excellent contemporary art. And they got a feeling for what collecting and contemporary art can mean to people.

And when did you decide to also open the gallery in Vienna?

Back in the mid-80s. It was at 29 Esterhazygasse, here in a 6th district courtyard. When I started with the gallery in Budapest, I started to travel permanently. We did up to eleven art fairs per year. Besides that, from six to eight art tours per year. We also organised exhibitions at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, in Moscow and in many capitals in the former socialist countries. I did exhibitions in Yekaterinburg and in Warsaw and in Sofia and in Skopje and in Prague, and so on. Big international shows.

Did you also show Austrian artists in your gallery in Budapest?

Yeah, of course. But from the beginning, I showed international art. It was not only Hungarian. It was not Austrian. We also invited artists from Prague, for example Stanislav Kolíbal.⁹

In this European Union funded project, we are three archives working together, reflecting on the year 2004 and 10 new member states joining the European Union. In Austria there were all these exhibitions coming up and companies actively starting to collect what they call CEE – like the branding of a new market. Can you tell us just a little bit about your personal experience in this historical timeframe, with your gallery and the art scene in general?

In terms of the general art scene, I would say that the institutions, if they started at all, they started very, very slowly. There was one main problem, which was that these institutions were to change into contemporary museums or exhibition institutions. But the same people were still sitting in these museums, and these people did not work with artists like Otis Laubert. And these artists didn't want to deal with those people. The institutions also did not have enough financial resources; the spaces were very often not in very good condition. And they were not connected to the international contemporary art scene. It was very difficult for them to connect and to be respected. Moderna galerija in Ljubljana, by the way, was the quickest and most intelligent. It was all very slow until galleries appeared. The bigger institutions were too heavy, too much stuck in their past. And soon we had discussions about the periphery and centres. Because the art scenes in Budapest or Ljubljana realized we are not in the centre and won't be a centre in a few months or years, so the discussion was about the periphery.

There were many panels about that in the '90s. And so I started to look to the western periphery. I travelled to Scotland, to Glasgow,

9 Stanislav Kolíbal (b.1925, in Orlová, Czech Republic) is an artist and sculptor, he was a Professor at the Prague Academy of Fine Arts from 1990–1993.

where former young, British artists like Damien Hirst and many others, did crazy exhibitions, like 27 artworks in a toilet, a Tramway, they were very innovative. They were very international. They built their networks.

And in Hungary, in Budapest, the artists were hanging around, complaining. Nothing happened. They did not take initiatives. And so I thought, okay, I'll connect them with Ross Sinclair¹⁰ and such artists. And so I brought them from Scotland or London to Budapest.

To give them some inspiration, to give them some ideas, to connect them. And in Budapest suddenly there was Ujlak Csoport. A group in an abandoned cinema, some artists started an exhibition space. And wow, it was so wonderful. But it did not last, it didn't last very long.

Let's talk about the art market, then. Is there a powerful market in Hungary?

You know, there is not, there is not a powerful market anywhere in the former socialist countries. Studies we made show that it takes centuries. Centuries of a tradition of living with art. Education in schools, the value of contemporary art, collections, contemporary art in the provinces, in society. If you look at the Baltic region, for example, you can see the role of art, in building nations and identity. Therefore, they needed contemporary art and music. Their artists studied abroad, in Berlin or in Paris or Petersburg or Munich. And so the artists came back to these new nations to contribute, to build an identity. To contribute, to be part of that. Something similar is going on in Arab countries now. It's amazing.

And how do you see the art market in Slovenia? Do you think that there is something there?

It's very small. I was invited twice to do studies of whether to make an art fair or not. The biggest problem is the separation of former Yugoslavia. Before, a Croatian would have bought a

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Ross Sinclair (b. 1966) is a visual artist, musician and writer.

Serbian artist. And the other way round. And this was cut off almost completely. It doesn't happen anymore. We know by the history. And this is a big challenge. And, the other thing is that there are very, very few collectors. And, you know, the problem is that in terms of the market, neither Prague, Budapest, Warsaw, Bucharest, are ready to organise art fairs. They tried. It did not work. Not enough collectors. In this huge country Romania, you had a maximum of 15 collectors. In the beginning, four.

But wasn't it also pretty difficult to start with the fair in Vienna?

Well, yes, that started in the '80s. You know, the history of the Kunst-Wien¹¹ and there were several fairs which developed, one after the other. And it was always difficult. Fairs are usually mostly at the exhibitors' expense. So it's a market.

We were also talking about the Viennafair, which started in 2005. It was a very big event. And we were trying to explain the history of the fair based on press articles which show that the fair caused lots of discussions, some galleries didn't take part anymore, there were several changes of directorship, and a special collection concept sponsored by Russian investors.

It was always, in fact, the same fair, but it became more and more international. That's the priority. In the first years, it didn't make sense at all to make it international. Because the Austrian collectors were still very local. As a collector, you support your local artists. And only then can you experience that the best for the local artists is if they are involved in international exchanges. It's the only way. But for that, collectors need many years and a lot of experience.

11 Kunst-Wien was the first fair for contemporary art in Vienna, it ran from 1995 until 2004.

How did you experience the *Viennafair 2005*¹², with the focus on CEE sponsored by the Erste Bank?

Well, you know, I knew all the exhibitors. And I saw how difficult it was for them. It was a really good price — they could participate for a really good price. And the focus helped, but they still did not sell very much. For many reasons. Because the Austrian collectors had to learn, to gain experience. But also the galleries from the East, they had to develop their own experience. What to present and how. And there was a big gap, of course. For example, when I brought guests to Bucharest, they had a shock. The art lovers I brought from the West. They had a shock. Because it was quite academic. It was a completely different art world. And that, of course, has consequences also at fairs and for the galleries.

I was also working in Russia for more than 20 years, in Moscow, I discovered artists who understood this international thing, like AES+F¹³ and Blue Noses.¹⁴ They were working with the Internet, new techniques. And so I started to work with these Russian artists. I brought them out. I brought AES+F to the international field, and Blue Noses. AES+F are now based in New York and Berlin. They are less and less in Moscow. But now they are not that much present on the art market any more, they are doing stage design for theatres and such projects.

For Blue Noses we needed security at the international fairs for example in Madrid. They didn't have money and they were crazy. So they fixed the projector, arranged boxes from supermarkets on pedestals, and then the projection was screened

12 Viennafair was a fair for contemporary art established in Vienna in 2005 and held annually until 2015.

13 AES+F is a collective of four Russian artists. First formed as AES Group in 1987 by Tatiana Arzamasova, Lev Evzovich, and Evgeny Svyatsky, the collective became AES+F when Vladimir Fridkes joined in 1995, <https://aesf.art/> (accessed, 15.7.2024).

14 The Blue Noses Group was founded in 1998 by Viacheslav Mizin and Alexander Shaburov.

in there. People were crazy about such installations. And we could sell them because they had reasonable prices. We needed security because of the crowds in our booths. It was great. A super success and interesting work. But they split up. They have not worked for some years. I was very involved in the Moscow art scene. I did many projects there, also the fair at Moscow, and made many friends.

Did it end with the war, or had it already ended earlier, because of politics? Are the people you know abroad now?

Yes it had already ended before. We had 16 guests from different cities in Russia and from Kyiv living in our flat over the last year. My former assistants from Moscow now are both in Vienna with their families. It started already after the big financial crisis, you could see how things got worse and worse, and many good people left, like also from Hungary now.

Interview with BORIS ONDREIČKA¹

Boris Ondreička is a curator, artist, author and singer based in Bratislava and Vienna. He has worked as project coordinator at Soros centre for contemporary arts, Bratislava, director of art-initiative tranzit.sk, Bratislava, and since 2012 as curator at Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna. In 2010 he co-founded the Július Koller Society. He also heads the Class of Interpretation Prague, which he initiated — a unique project that examines intellectual processes, art mediation and critical thinking, and brings together international thinkers. From 2021–2023 he was artistic director of the Viennese art fair viennacontemporary.²

During our project we looked at what happened in Vienna in 2004/2005 with relation to the EU expansion, when we soon discovered that it was mainly banks that addressed this topic in exhibitions, also at the art fair, which started in 2005 as Viennafair with a focus on CEE (Central Eastern Europe).

To me, speaking about banks, it was Erste Bank that started this expansion. They took over Czech Sparkasse and Slovak Sparkasse. And so in 2004 the Czech tranzit and Slovak tranzit were the first units in the tranzit network³ and immediately afterwards the Austrian one was founded with Georg Schöllhammer,⁴ and immediately after that,

1 This interview was conducted at basis wien on 31 January 2024.

2 <https://dutchartinstitute.eu/page/1179/boris-ondrei-ka>, (accessed, 12.7.2024), <https://viennacontemporarymagazine.com/2021/08/31/presenting-boris-ondrei-ka-the-new-artistic-director-of-viennacontemporary/>, (accessed, 12.7.2024).

3 “tranzit is a unique network of civic associations working independently in the field of contemporary art in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania and across the borders of a wider Europe tranzit’s main partner is the ERSTE Foundation”, <https://tranzit.org/en/about/> (accessed, 8.7.2024).

4 Georg Schöllhammer is an author, curator and editor-in-chief of the magazine springerin - Hefte für Gegenwartskunst, Vienna, which he co-founded in 1995. From 2005 to 2007, he was editor-in-chief of documenta 12 magazines. Since 2004 Schöllhammer is head of tranzit.at.

the Hungarian. The bank created a holding and they actually centralized their whole cultural policy programs with Erste Stiftung. And on the basis of this evaluation, they started a collection which is called Kontakt.⁵ One of the pilot programs was the *Gender Check* exhibition at Mumok, which you might remember.⁶

The tranzit network was initiated by Kathrin Rhomberg⁷ who later co-established Kontakt and is still a director. Together with Mária Hlavajová, who used to be the leader of Soros Center in Bratislava in the 1990s. Later she moved to Holland, where she is still director of BAK Utrecht. They started a project that is called Former West.⁸

Each tranzit went through a very autonomous and spontaneous formation. So, Prague had completely different formats in the beginning than Bratislava and definitely than Austria. That was the point.

We were talking to Vít Havránek in Prague about tranzit, his program and the collaboration with Erste Bank, as well as establishing a new way of working as an institution. What was your view on that? As you were responsible for tranzit in Bratislava.

I think it was a very synergetic interest between us and Erste Bank. Obviously, for Erste it was the aspect of representation, of involve-

5 Kontakt collection was founded in 2004 by Erste Group, "with the aim of collecting and supporting the Central and Eastern European artists who have reflected the social and political developments of recent decades in their work" <https://www.erstestiftung.org/en/activities/kontakt/> (accessed, 12.7.2024).

6 *Gender Check. Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, MUMOK, Vienna (25.9.2009–31.1.2010).

7 Kathrin Rhomberg studied art history and classical archaeology, and worked as curator and head of the exhibition office at the Secession, Vienna, from 1990 to 2001. She curated, among other exhibitions, *Manifesta 3*, Ljubljana, in 2000 (with Francesco Bonami, Ole Bouman and Mária Hlavajová); *Roman Ondák — Loop*, the Slovak and Czech Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale, 2009; Rhomberg has been director of the Kontakt Collection of ERSTE Foundation since 2014.

8 Former West was a contemporary art research, education, publishing and exhibition project (2008–2016) initiated by BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, <https://formerwest.org/> (accessed, 8.7.2024).

ment, but they were also getting backstage information. So when they started the collection through us, they got access to every studio and every dark corner of the arts and culture. So it's not only about marketing, it's also about knowing the environment. And in the end, it's about a commodity. When you compare Kontakt with the Generali collection, the profile is quite similar in this: the black and white aesthetics of the 1960s, the 1970s, and late modern, like the new avant-garde core. And luckily Kontakt still continues. Also, tranzit achieved significant international recognition. We were even invited in 2011 to curate the *Manifesta 8*. So as a network, we curated *Manifesta 8* in Spain.⁹ And, we also had many top tens in *Artforum*.¹⁰ So this was our success. While tranzit were not very focused on the compilation of archives. For example, in Bratislava we were very much a do-it-yourself art space with studios. So there was a lot of physical production happening and all the money basically went to that. So you can't find any reasonable ephemera and memorabilia. You can find some data, you can browse the website, which is not a hundred percent complete, but there's still reasonable stuff there.

Bearing in mind the Former West project that you mentioned earlier, we tried to look closer at the history of the terminology of East Art...

There was also obviously East Art Map,¹¹ the initiative to let's say archive and provide a visualization on the internet. You had people, especially from NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst) in Slovenia, circulating who were kind of collecting new senses of former East.

Did you relate to that term, then?

I'm a kid of the 1980s. Because Bratislava had access to it, I grew up

9 *Manifesta 8*, Murcia–Cartagena (9.10.2010–9.1.2011).

10 'TOP TEN' is a regular column in the contemporary art magazine *Artforum*.

11 http://www.projekt-relations.de/en/explore/east_art_map/index.php (accessed, 8.7.2024), <https://web.archive.org/web/20210925085123/http://www.eastartmap.org/> (accessed, 8.7.2024)

on Austrian TV, like Kunst-Stücke.¹² There was a Friday broadcast all night long. Then there were Wolfgang Kos and Angelika Lang on the radio. So in a manner of speaking, my authentic position was never East. I mean, I grew up on American hardcore punk.

But still, there are these tangible differences, and they still exist: income, language and a particular rupture in history from 1945 to 1989. Also there are different habits, different structures and there are different understandings of particular idiomatic structures, so we can still speak about a certain distance between things, mainly cultural phenomena.

When Viennafair started with a focus on CEE,¹³ a kind of branding started. How did that appear to you?

Actually, the fair still has that focus. I think it is now closer to the idea of Central Europe — still underrepresented on a global scale — and there is still a lot of interesting stuff which you can sell. But there was a controversy from the very beginning, that on one hand you have former East Bloc galleries which are heavily sponsored by Erste Bank and other sponsors, and on the other side you have Viennese galleries and Western galleries which don't get this support. So there was controversy about how to equalize the market or to make the market healthy. In Vienna, Austrian collectors are buying Austrian art from Austrian galleries. So even if it's international, the majority is really completely locally thinking. And then also the galleries from Prague or from Warsaw were not satisfied because they were not selling. So there is still this barrier, there is still a distance.

12 Kunst-Stücke was the title of a weekly cultural program, between 1981 and 2002 by Austrian national public broadcaster ORF, <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kunst-Stücke> (accessed, 8.7.2024).

13 Viennafair was a fair for contemporary art established in Vienna in 2005 and held annually until 2015. With its first edition, the new artfair had already positioned itself as "The International Art Fair focused on CEE". See the cover of the catalogue by Reed Messe Wien GmbH (Ed.): *Viennafair 2005*, Vienna, 2005.

And why do you think that is?

Basically, awareness is missing. Also Austrian galleries and artists have huge support from the state. And there is also a collectors' base, an institutional base, while in former East Bloc countries there is a huge lack in these terms. So there are no collectors, there are very weak institutions and no local support. So money is in extreme disproportion.

If you are looking back now to 20 years ago, what do you think the difference made was in joining the EU?

Slovakia, for example, is not only EU, it has also the Euro. So it's also like a Euro Union. And we are also in NATO. So this made a complete change.

Also on the level of investors, this was a drastic change. But more drastic were the 1990s, which we call the turbocapitalist period. Because there was a really fast transformation of the entire system from post-socialist conditions to standard capitalism. And that was like hardcore. And still, the fruits of that period are there to be sold.

In our research, we focused mainly on Czechia and Slovenia, but there were also exhibitions like *New Slovak Art*¹⁴ or *New Art from Bratislava*¹⁵ in 2002 and 2003. How did you feel about those exhibitions? And now, 20 years later... Do you feel like the knowledge of the art history of countries like Slovakia or Czechia has grown here in Austria? Or is there still a bit lacking because 'Western' scholars don't really focus so much on it?

In terms of radical museology, for example, for decades and decades, leading Western institutions had been creating certain chronological, hierarchical structures for ways to speak about the arts: What is the value, and what is the price. And suddenly you had a change in paradigm. Like, you have the former East there. And then there are many artistic positions, or even movements, which significantly

14 "New" Slovak Art 1936–2001, Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna (17.1.–23.2.2002).

15 *Stadt in Sicht. Neue Kunst aus Bratislava*, Künstlerhaus, Vienna (30.4.–27.7.2003).

deconstruct these Western chronologies. And for leading museums, like, for example, Centre-Pompidou, or MoMA, it is so difficult to integrate these new dates, these new works, in the narratives which they had created. And you also have to understand that, for example in the 1950s, art was one of the political export items. So on the one hand, you had American Abstract Expressionism as an expression of personal free will. And on the other hand, you had the Soviet Socialist Realism, which was like an absolute antagonism of things. HKW¹⁶ in Berlin was actually built as a paradigm, as a kind of fortress of Western culture on the border to East Berlin. So it will take ages to, let's say, objectify these post-colonial conditions of leading, which are exclusively Western institutions, to new chronologies. We will integrate, the former East and also non-European and non-Western canons. And this is a hell for money, logistics, handling, everything. So these leading institutions are still quite reserved in integrating even crucial pieces of non-Western art in their collections. And this will take maybe 20, maybe even 30 years.

You were involved in some exhibitions on identity, institutional critique and self-empowerment (like *Junge Szene '98* and *Ausgeträumt*, curated by Kathrin Rhomberg, both at Secession). In 2004 it feels like something is breaking up, freed from a past. Related to this, after that big wave of change, it's hard to see a specific practice which related to that before.

I think it's also about the next generations taking over. In 2004 I was not young anymore and mentioning *Junge Szene*, in the same period I was also a part of a show at PS1 MoMA which was called *Generation Z*¹⁷ that was about the last generation. This exhibition had a very intelligent statement by Barbara Vanderlinden, Alanna Heiss and Klaus Biesenbach, who were the curators, which was a question and there

16 HKW, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, <https://www.hkw.de/> (accessed, 12.7.2024).

17 *Generation Z*, MoMA PS1, New York City (18.4.–6.6.1999).

was no answer. It was about the 1990s as being the destroyer of generations and the internet obviously being the destroyer of community, it was about fragmentalization and fractualization, of being distributed, not being together, the concept that digital experience was used as a way to isolate yourself.

And I think in the zeros (2000s), the millennial generation had some reactive behaviors. So, for example, in Slovakia in the first five years there was a huge renaissance of painting as a reaction to the 1990s, which were completely focused on installation art. And installation art was against the 1980s, which had, for instance, Neue Wilde Malerei. And then it's actually completely dissolved. So now I don't feel that there is any generationalism, there are no -isms.

So if you don't see these like stronger things, I think it's about generation. It's not about capitalism, it's not about banks, it's not about changing the system. This is very global. And we also don't have that massive aspect of minority in our region.

In Slovakia there has recently been a kind of an enlightenment of Roma, which is really important. Actually, a Slovak Roma artist holds the Belvedere Art Award 2022, Robert Gabris.¹⁸

So this is a small new element, that there are these tiny minorities which are noisier than before. And this is great, obviously. Also a small Vietnamese community, and especially Roma. But that's it. Like identity is gone. Emancipation is done.

Did you move to Vienna after studying?

No, I never moved to Vienna. This is also something that would actually lead back to the question of distance, Vienna is 60 kilometers away going from Bratislava to Vienna, but from Vienna to Bratislava it's 360. But this is not only a cultural aspect. It's also that Bratislava is like Graz, it's like a small town. And there are not that many reasons to go there. So that's normal.

18

Robert Gabris, b. 1986 in Hnusta Likie, Slovakia.

It would be interesting hearing from your perspective, as you were artistic director of the fair until last October. What do you think about the Viennese art fair situation?

Every larger city in Europe has a fair. At the top of the pyramid, you have the structure of Art Basel, which is now all around. So you don't compete with that. Because that's definite. It's like monumental.

And perfect. It has existed for 50 years. More than 50 years. But then, which Austrians very often forget, your country is called Österreich. So it's like East. And there is money all around. And everyone knows that the money is there. There are many institutions and persons who are trying to get this money. And this is a matter of information, contacts, cultivation, education.

In Austria, you have three proper art fairs. In a few weeks, you have Stage¹⁹ in Bregenz. In March, you have Spark²⁰ in the Marxhalle. In September, Vienna Contemporary²¹ in Halle D. This is not only adventurous. It also very much reflects the monitoring of the capital.

And the money is there. And also interest is there.

You also have to find a specific marketing position: What you sell. How you name it. Every art fair needs to be unique. And the spontaneous idea about a Viennese art fair is that it is this post-Habsburg representation of the entire territory. And you can reach many countries. You can reach Switzerland, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary. All around you. So, this is a multiculturalism, which is not implemented, which is not internal. But which is, like, contextual in the multinational environment. That's a good challenge for business as well. So that's why these art fairs flourish. Even if they don't do that much selling.

19 Stage Bregenz, a new contemporary art fair. The first edition opened in Bregenz in March 2024.

20 Spark Art Fair Vienna, a contemporary art fair in Vienna. The first edition opened in June 2021.

21 Viennacontemporary is a Viennese fair for contemporary art that was first held in 2015 and continues to be held annually. Like its predecessor Viennafair, the fair maintains "a unique focus on the emerging scenes of Central and Eastern Europe."

And do they, do they flourish?

Yeah. I mean, look at Bregenz, a new art fair. I've seen the gallery list. It's very nice. There are good galleries. There will be good art. Also, there is this consideration for the business part of art fairs. Whether they consider themselves as being for-profit or not for-profit. Which sounds like a paradox, or even an oxymoron. The art fair as an organization only helps galleries to sell. The art fair does not sell. The galleries, they sell. To help galleries to sell means helping artists to sell. So, on that level, there is this consideration of running the business on a non-profit basis. And this brings us back to the origin of the East Bloc focus of this fair. With this kind of behavior, you can support galleries that are not selling so much. And galleries when they do sell, 50% goes to the artists. So it can be socialist. Like crypto-capitalist socialist, you know. Strange, eh? Yeah. Chomsky called it liberal socialism.

This brings another perspective when you say that you are not thinking that so much in this is interwoven with politics or history, but more in a generational, more international view of art production...

I mean avant-gardes were built as international, on principle and I'm like a grandkid of the avant-garde and also punk — when I was 11 — was international you know and anarchist. In 2004 I did this interview for *Falter* and on the title page it said “New Neighbors”²² and I was so hurt — we're not new, we've always been here!

The 1990s were a decade of absolute exoticism, and also somehow of depressive exoticism, because all of these Western curators and galleries who came to the former East, they were disappointed because it was so international. The art was actually compatible.

So to fine-tune the understanding of what the difference was took 10 years for international experts. And I believe that it was only the second generation, I mean after 1990s, which started to understand it.

22 The article by Matthias Dusini was published with the title 'Last Exit Bratislava' in the weekly newspaper *Falter* (1-2/04) on 7.2.2004, a special issue dedicated to Slovakia with the cover headline “Der neue Nachbar im Überblick” (the new neighbor at a glance).

But back to your question about 2004 and the expansion of European Union, it was like: ta-da, celebration, but you didn't feel it on an ontological level. You didn't feel that there was a massive change. Because the massive change was to open the border in 1990. That was the change, you know. And the free travel and stuff like that. And anyhow, we had, like, no visa. So for us to become European Union, not for the economy or politics, but for us as people, there were no visas. So there was not such a big change. Obviously there was no Erasmus, but there were a lot of other great programs which supported us. I studied both in America and in England because of grants. No Erasmus, but still, you know, free of charge.

Interview with MARISA RAVALLI about the Center for Contemporary Art Futura¹

Marisa Ravalli is a curator and art critic. She studied at California Institute of Arts, where she acquired a BFA in Fine Art. She moved to Prague in 1992, where she began an active career in the cultural field. She wrote articles for the *Prague Post*, worked as a curator in Nová síň Gallery, and founded the Center for Contemporary Art Futura. She currently teaches and collaborates with her partner, Jiří Příhoda, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA. She is also in the process of opening a new gallery space called, INHABIT GALERIE in New Mexico.

The Center for Contemporary Art Futura was a non-profit organization founded in 2003, based in Prague, at the address Holečkova 49. During its existence, Futura organized a number of exhibitions featuring both Czech and international artists, either independently or in collaboration with other institutions or guest curators. Futura ended its activity in 2022.

What were your beginnings like? When did you start working in Prague?

Since 1993, I worked in the beginning as an art critic for the *Prague Post*. I did a lot of interviews, even with really well-known people at that time. There was an English-speaking expatriate community in Prague, tourism was just starting. I introduced them to artists and to people that they would never normally meet or know about, I loved that, but it was difficult as nobody yet spoke English very well. I really struggled with those interviews in the early years with my broken beginning Czech. I also worked with Jiří Švestka at his first gallery space in Prague for a few years, until I was offered a curatorial position at Galerie Nová Síň. I had interned at the Lisson Gallery in London a few years back and fell in love with curating and the art world.

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The interview was conducted as part of the ARTAS project, online 11.12.2023.

And then, you started a Futura. What was your role in the Center for Contemporary Art Futura, and who were your partners?

I was the head and founding member of Futura. I'm the one who initiated seeking out a partner and had the basic workings for the whole initiative already on paper. I'd already done quite a few alternative projects. I really wanted to start something like a "Kunsthalle", which I felt Prague was lacking at the time. I knew that's what Prague needed. I was really trying to get something bigger, something that was right in the centre, something great, so I could continue with what I had started a few years earlier on a smaller level at Galerie Nová Sň. I was looking for partners, since this was going to be something much bigger than a simple gallery space, and I met Camille Hunt through a mutual friend². Camille was an art seller; she was actually running her own business. I liked that she was coming from a totally different standpoint, because up to that point I'd always worked on a non-profit level.

We knew we needed additional financial backing, and so Camille suggested Alberto di Stefano, a real estate investor. He and his partner had a keen interest in art and so it all began. Partner of Alberto, who was just starting to study art and become an artist himself, became a bit of a conflict of interest, and both of them became more and more interested in running the space and manipulating the program, plus the space itself had its' own issues being so dilapidated and in desperate need of renovation. So instead of a financial backer, we got partners who ended up wanting to take over the entire project. It was a really big learning experience. Next time around I found my own financial backing. My recommendation is to research your partners more thoroughly and understand their real interest, before jumping into anything.

2 Camille Hunt, a Canadian gallerist and curator, co-founded the Hunt Kastner Artworks gallery in 2005 with her colleague Katherine Kastner. The gallery was later renamed Hunt Kastner.

What was your initial plan with the gallery?

I wanted to showcase Czech work of course. My intention was not to bring as many foreign shows as I did, but I really wanted to integrate. This was the point of my being fed up with not having opportunities to show Czech work outside of the Czech Republic. I wanted to show that the work is as good as any other work in Europe. And I really wanted to be able to showcase Czech artists work alongside well-known British, American, Italian, Dutch, French and Austrian artists, and to do truly collaborative shows, which I had success doing in the past at Galerie Nová Síň. My intention for the space was to really be able to showcase amazing work from abroad that possibly Czechs hadn't had a chance to see. I wanted to get big names. At that time, most Czechs couldn't afford to just hop on a plane and fly to New York to see new work by Annika Larsson, for example, who was the top of the art world at that time. I really wanted to be able to bring those artists, while also showcasing amazing work by local artists throughout the many spaces of Futura.

Was it hard to find an audience for a new gallery?

One thing that was really nice, that was a big help in the beginning, was collaborating with the Chalupecký Award. I knew the organizers and they had just lost the space where they were previously, I showed them Futura, and they loved it. That was amazing for Futura, because I think without that show, people wouldn't have gotten as excited as they did so quickly about our new space. It was such a privilege to host President Václav Havel around Futura, a big highlight of my career.

How did you look for the artists?

It was different for me than for most foreigners because I was here with my husband.³ We were really close. I went to all the openings and met everybody in those early days. And it was just a different

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Marisa Ravalli's husband is the Czech artist Jiří Přihoda.

time, we immediately became friends. People were very open, and they were eager and excited about meeting new people from abroad. I'd say that around 1998–99, things started to shift. The initial interest in foreigners and interest from Europe and abroad in the Czech Republic and in particular in Czech Artists was waning away. It was another reason why I felt Futura could be an important moment, to do something less “alternative” which would attract more well-known outside curators and artists. They'd come to Prague and say, here's this great space that's being run professionally. Come and see this. Czech artists' attitudes changed over the decades as well. In the nineties, Czech artists were really eager to show their work and to collaborate. They had this real energy, and they were opening up, experimenting and taking big risks for the first time, it was an exciting time! With the onset of the new millenium, artists like Michal Pěchouček were leading the way, but the younger generations attitude was starting to shift. They could get state and city stipends and there were quite a few alternative gallery spaces offering them local show opportunities. It was becoming more and more difficult to work with local Czech artists, and I worked with the most difficult. I'm the one who initiated the negotiations for the commissioned pieces from David Černý in the courtyard at Futura which wasn't an easy feat, as they were quite controversial at the time.

Did you receive any institutional support?

How was the gallery financially supported?

We all supported the endeavor in the beginning. I took care of the bulk of exhibition costs via city and state grants and one-time sponsors. From the moment we moved into the space on Holečková street, Alberto and Camille paid the basic running costs, and I ran the space until our grants came through. We received financial support from the Czech Ministry of Culture and sometimes from Cultural Centres in Prague, which covered some of the basic running costs for exhibitions and the space. I was always seeking outside support for exhibitions and running costs. This took up the majority of my time,

which left me very little time to focus on the exhibition program or to meet with artists and do studio visits. I also ran the space on a daily basis and could rarely get away during the opening hours. I had one assistant to help me during the time I was starting Futura, but each assistant only lasted a few months, as the workload was tremendous. I would get to the space an hour or so before opening to turn on all the equipment, and then after work I would attend dinners and functions until late at night trying to get funding and make connections- it was almost 24-7 dedication.

Did you have any connections with local non-profit organizations, such as the Soros Center for Contemporary Art or Tranzit?

Never. And this is funny because now this is the opposite. Every time I tried to do something in Prague, I was just hitting a wall. Local entities never wanted to collaborate with me or do anything together. They had much more luck than we did. I never had any of the financial help they did. They had such opportunities. And in a way, it was disappointing for me because I felt like they focused on such marginal and alternative areas. I really wanted to bring Czech artists to the forefront and to get them opportunities outside, to get their work shown abroad and provide bigger and better chances for shows. And I knew that to do that, there must be a space in Prague that's collaborating, that can do the same thing. That can reciprocate, as this is what other institutions do. But local entities just weren't interested. They just wanted to do their own thing. They had their own, small, insulated, group of artists they worked with. My thinking was very different.

Were foreign companies and institutions more open to collaborating?

They were very open. Whereas it's funny, if I was in London or if I was in Paris or Amsterdam, Vienna, I was always given a very warm welcome and like, yes, we want to collaborate with you. But locally, I

was always treated like a foreigner. I was really on my own and I had to just find people that were open, which were the artists at that time. Amazing artists like Kateřina Vincourová, Veronika Bromová, Křištof Kintera, Markéta Othová, Veronika Drahotová, and writers/curators like Martina Pachmanová, who is fantastic. These people became my really close friends.

Do you think entry into the EU in 2004 helped with making connections abroad?

Possibly, but you would have to ask someone else this question, as I left curating around that time.

Did you have the idea that every exhibition would be accompanied by a catalogue or at least some printed material?

Yes. For each show I tried to find funds to publish a small brochure or catalogue. I organized all the design, printing, etc. for the initial brochures and catalogues during the time I was in Futura. And I tried in the beginning to run an art bookstore, I even wanted to start a small café, but Camille and Alberto didn't want to have anything to do with that, and it was extremely difficult to find the time for it. I had some basic things of my own, I brought my own archive there to Futura so that I could show people catalogues of Czech work when they came to visit the space. I really felt it's necessary. If you have a big space, you should have at least a reading room or some kind of an archive that people and curators, when they come from abroad can take a look at. It wasn't yet an internet culture, it was still the time of paper. It was really important back then to have that catalogue and book archive.

Did you also sell art works at art fairs? What about the Armory Show 2004, Art Prague?

I managed to get our participation in the Armory Show. I had a friend in New York who got me in touch with one of the organizers, and she was kind enough to give us a chance to participate in 2004. It was such a fun experience! We were there as a non-profit space but were

able to help some artists to sell a few pieces, like Jan Kotík (who was there with us, and is sadly missed). We did not take a commission for selling and all the proceeds went directly to the artist. I have such wonderful memories of that time. I was very sad to see that Futura didn't continue much of that after I left.

How did you find the gallery space?

The city sometimes offers spaces to non-profit and cultural activities. We found a fantastic space, right in the city center and it was really decent. We applied. It would have been absolutely perfect. It wasn't the size of Futura. Futura ended up being amazing because it was such a big and elaborate space. This city space was smaller, but it still could have worked to be something quite different and quite spectacular. Basically, Alberto di Stefano deceived us, and said that we didn't get the space. But we did get it, I found out later through the city officials. And this was about the time when the big problems began, he wasn't an honest person, and it was really the breaking point because we knew we couldn't continue in this way. He had also promised more financial backing to run the space and for exhibitions and projects, instead most of the backing had to go into renovation of what was his own building, so instead of a partnership we became indebted to him and in his eyes he was loaning us the space and we would have to find the funding to pay him to continue to use it, so Camille and I were basically forced to completely pull out.

When did you decide to leave Futura?

What was your last exhibition?

It was three years after we'd started it, basically after we found out these things I mentioned before. Alberto was not supporting the shows as per our agreement. It was impossible to do the kind of program that I wanted to do if I stayed there. My last show was the large exhibition of the French Collection – which was supposed to travel

as well.⁴ I had the entire exhibition organized and financially covered, and that's when things fell apart within Futura. The exhibition space was in terrible condition and wasn't ready to show works of art of that level and price. It would have been a huge risk on my side to guarantee the works would not get damaged just from being in the space itself, which had dangerous humidity and moisture issues. Alberto was unwilling to fix some of the issues in the building on a more permanent level, and I personally was not willing to risk exhibiting fragile and priceless works of art there.

What did you do after you left Futura?

I moved to Lubná, a small Czech village, and I had children. I lived very happily for a time. Once my children were school-age, and we moved to Austin, Texas.

4 *NATURALIA – sbírky bez hranic V.*, Center for Contemporary Art Futura, Prague (24.11.2005–13.2.2006).

Interview with MARUŠA SAGADIN about her artistic practice and her connection to Slovenia and Austria

Maruša Sagadin was born in 1978 in Ljubljana and lives in Vienna. She studied architecture at Graz University of Technology before moving to Vienna to study Performative Arts and Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts. From 2012–2017 she was assistant professor in the Department for Performative Arts and Sculpture with Professor Monica Bonvicini at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. Since October 2023 she has been the visiting professor in the sculpture studio at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague.

Welcome to Maruša Sagadin, we are at basis wien, it's the 1st of July 2024. We have already spoken a bit about our *Art Archives Study* project and our investigation of mobility in the field of art around 2004. You have already told us that you have lived in Austria since the beginning of the '90s. What was the reason you moved to Austria?

I was 12 years old back then, so I moved with my family, with my father, mother and brother. My father took over a company in Graz and we came with him. I finished school there and I also finished studying architecture in Graz. I had a diploma from the Technical University. Afterwards I worked one year for Forum Stadtpark and I was already active in Graz in the art scene, doing projects and exhibitions. In 2004 I moved to Vienna to study sculpture with Monica Bonvicini¹ at the Academy of Fine Arts. Since her practice and her interests were focussed so much on architecture as well, this was a good connection and actually the beginning of my artistic career.

1 Monica Bonvicini (b. 1965 in Venice) is an installation artist, video artist and photographer.

When you were living in Graz, did you visit exhibitions at Neue Galerie, for example, or were you in touch with Peter Weibel and/or the curatorial team for the steirischer herbst?

Yeah, I was young but I was interested in art and so I jobbed as “Ausstellungsaufsicht” (supervisor) at steirischer herbst and Neue Galerie while a student. I won a prize from Neue Galerie, the Förderpreis.² I think Peter Weibel was there back then, but the curator who actually selected the artists was Dirk Snauwert, a Belgian curator. We had already done some projects while I was studying architecture, the Technical University had a department for art,³ which is now run by Milica Tomić⁴ and back then it was run by Hans Kupelwieser.⁵ He was the one who actually brought us into the arts with first projects in public space.

Do you remember what it was?

It was actually an installation I did with my colleague Michael Hieslmair. We were feeding pigeons illegally and we could hang huge bags directly on the façade of the Neue Galerie. Without the connections the artists Sabina Hörtner⁶ and Hans Kupelwieser, who were our professors, had to the Neue Galerie that wouldn't have been possible.

2 Förderungspreis des Landes Steiermark für zeitgenössische bildende Kunst 2004 (Styrian contemporary art award for emerging artists), Maruša Sagadin and Michael Hieslmair won the Arbeitsstipendium des Landes Steiermark (Styrian working stipend), <https://www.museum-joanneum.at/neue-galerie-graz/unser-programm/ausstellungen/event/foerderungspreis-des-landes-steiermark-fuer-zeitgenoessische-bildende-kunst-2004> (accessed, 15.7.2024).

3 Institute for Contemporary Art at Graz University of Technology, <https://izk.tugraz.at/> (accessed, 15.7.2024).

4 Milica Tomić (b. 1960 in Belgrade) is a contemporary artist and educator. Since 2014 she has been the Head of the Contemporary Art Institute (Faculty of Architecture) at the Graz University of Technology.

5 Hans Kupelwieser (b. 1948 in Lunz am See) is a sculptor, graphic artist, photographer, and media artist. From 1995–2013 he was professor at the Institute for Contemporary Art (IZK) at Graz University of Technology.

6 Sabina Hörtner (b. 1967 in Bruck an der Mur) is an installation and media artist.

We were looking at archival materials connected to our project from the time around the year 2004 that addressed the rise of the idea of the European Union in the context of former Eastern European countries. Peter Weibel also often engaged with issues like political identity within European history, also with a wider global perspective, like in the exhibition *Inclusion/Exclusion*, which he curated as part of steirischer herbst in 1996. Do you remember whether you saw any of those exhibitions?

I saw some of those shows, but back then art in public space was more approachable for me, more accessible. For example, some projects in the context of steirischer herbst, also Werner Fenz⁷ and his projects in public space and the history of Trigon.⁸ Of course, Peter Weibel⁹ was also a prominent figure, but sometimes, such figures are so far away, like idols, beyond your reach.

The history of Trigon was really remarkable, especially in Graz and Styria. When thinking about the connection between public space and Trigon, I immediately think of breaking up boundaries and not thinking of space in terms of nations, national borders, but of a historical area or region. Did you ever have questions about identity as a national concept, like being Slovenian or Austrian — was it an issue when you were in Graz?

Not so much back then, at the time I think it was much more about

7 Werner Fenz (1944–2016) was an art historian, exhibition curator and long-standing director of the Institute for Art in Public Space Styria.

8 The trinational Trigon biennial was founded in 1963 and conceived as a presentation of contemporary art from Austria, Italy and former Yugoslavia. The Trigon biennials were held until 1995. Over the years, the circle of represented countries was expanded to include Hungary and later also Germany, France, Great Britain, Spain and the Czech Republic, <https://www.museum-joanneum.at/neue-galerie-graz/unser-programm/ausstellungen/trigon> (accessed, 15.7.2024).

9 Peter Weibel (1944–2023) was an artist, curator and theoretician. From 1993 to 2011 he was head curator of the Neue Galerie Graz, and from 1999–2023 he was the director of the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe.

escaping the architectural system, going to Vienna and entering the art system as an outsider. After my graduation at the academy, I started working as an assistant in the class of Monica Bonvicini, and with this educational aspect of communicating with the students my interest for Ljubljana started to grow. I organized a trip to Ljubljana with my students, together with my dear colleague Stefanie Seibold.¹⁰ Sometimes there are lucky coincidences. I saw a poster in the Museumsquartier for their Curators-in-Residency program mentioning Alenka Gregorič,¹¹ who was the director of Mestna galerija, the City Art Gallery¹² back then. It's always easier to approach somebody when you have an institution as your background. So I asked her if we could visit her museum with a class, and she said: "Listen Maruša, I can organize two days whenever you want, just tell me which institutions you want to see and I'll make a schedule for you." And so that was, of course: Moderna galerija, Škuc Gallery, City Art Gallery and a couple of NGOs which were based in the Metelkova squatted area. This was in 2014.

With this connection, my interest and search for identity began. It was subconsciously, it was not planned. I started to compare my practice to the practice in Slovenia. Alenka also invited me to Tobačna, the tobacco factory residency,¹³ which is part of the City Art Gallery. This was the starting point of a really deep connection — an exchange with Slovene art, Slovene curators and Slovene artists. The Austrian sculpture education was so different to what I saw in Slovenia. I began

10 Stefanie Seibold (b. 1967 in Stuttgart) is an artist working with performance, installation, video art and sound. Since 2009 she has been teaching at the sculpture department of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, where she held the Professorship for Gender and Space until Oct. 2021.

11 Alenka Gregorič is an art historian, curator and writer. From 2009–2020 she was the artistic director and curator at City Art Gallery Ljubljana. She is currently the artistic director of Cukrarna in Ljubljana.

12 Mestna galerija Ljubljana/City Art Gallery Ljubljana, <https://mgml.si/en/city-art-gallery/> (accessed, 15.7.2024).

13 <https://www.transartists.org/en/air/toba%C4%8Dna-001-cultural-center> (accessed, 15.7.2024).

to question my work. What is the form? Does it speak as a political gesture? Is it enough? Is it too much on the surface? Should I be more direct with the content and not looking so much for formal solutions. When I was working in Austria I had a kind of protection, people knew what I was doing. You could see some connections to Monica Bonvicini or Manfred Pernice,¹⁴ or Heimo Zobernig,¹⁵ all teachers at the Academy. But when I was in Croatia, Slovenia or somewhere else I was kind of lost. I didn't want to be perceived as an outsider and just doing other stuff, but to delve into the questions that were posed to me in Slovenia and to integrate them in my practice. Slovenian artists are so advanced in theory and writing. It was also good motivation to further develop these aspects of my practice.

So you started to connect with some artists and curators in Ljubljana?

My first connection, even before Alenka Gregorič, was Beti Žerovc,¹⁶ a very important art historian and theoretician. She was curating the *Biennial of Graphic Arts* in 2011, which has a long international tradition, not functioning anymore solely as a graphics biennial but more like a biennial for contemporary art, and she invited me to do a project for it.

You mentioned Slovenia, the art scene as a challenging space you found yourself in. Would you distinguish between Slovenia and other former Yugoslavian countries, and what do you think is the difference?

One thing I see is that creating is very much connected to economic possibilities, especially in sculpture. It is very much connected to the capital that is there for you or is not there for you. If I think

14 Manfred Pernice (b. 1963 in Hildesheim, Germany) is a sculptor and installation artist. He was professor for Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna from 2004–2009.

15 Heimo Zobernig (b. 1958 in Mauthen, Austria) is a sculptor and video artist. Professor of Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna since 2000.

16 Beti Žerovc is an art historian and art theorist. She teaches at the Department of Art History at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana.

back, especially to the beginning of my practice, all the funds, all the possibilities — huge studios, the Academy, different stipends, there was a chance to actually make stuff. When I compare and talk to people in Slovenia, they simply don't have all those funds and there is no commercial market, and so you are kind of dependent on public money, which is not as available for young artists as it is for us here in Austria. And this leads to more non-material work, mental work, being involved with conceptual practice, using the head space deeply and a strong involvement, also of the younger generation, with text. I can only talk for Slovenia, I'm not aware of the Croatian, Bosnian, Serbian and Montenegro art scenes at all, unfortunately. Yeah, that would be my very simple explanation.

In *Body and the East*, Zdenka Badovinac describes “East art” and the political and economic conditions for making art — and the lack of material resources — as placing a significant focus on the body as raw material.

Would you think that this description from the beginning of the '90s is still something where we can see a difference today, like you are describing?

I don't know. I've just came back from the Triennial¹⁷ curated by Tevž Logar,¹⁸ and there were like three younger positions I noticed and they were all very into material. All of them built huge sculptures; huge installations indoors as well as outdoors, so maybe things are changing right now. And when I talk about the younger generation they are really 20 years younger than I am, about mid-20s or beginning of their 30s, so this is the next generation. They work very similarly to the production that we were used to in Austria. It became more global. Maybe some were educated at the Angewandte (University of Applied Arts Vienna) or the Bildende (Academy of Fine Arts Vienna), some already had internships at Städel (Hochschule für

17 10th Triennial of Contemporary Art. *Against the Stream of Time*, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana (21.6.–17.11.2024).

18 Tevž Logar (b. 1979 in Kranj) is an independent curator, editor and author.

Bildende Künste–Städelschule, Frankfurt am Main), more like the careers that we also know from Vienna.

I'm picking out just three figures and then there are like 3,000 others whose biographies I don't know. I also know more people who are working abroad, like Tobias Putrih¹⁹ or Jasmina Cibic²⁰ at MIT and London or Aleksandra Vajd²¹ in Prague, so this is definitely a different production than you would have if you were a professor in Ljubljana.

If you look back at the year 2004 when the EU enlargement happened and Slovenia became part of the EU, did this have any meaning for you personally at the time?

Interestingly, not so much. I got my Austrian passport back in 1997. I was a basketball player while I was still at school and I got my Austrian citizenship through that. It was actually the biggest thing that could happen to me because when I started to study architecture in 1997 I had no trouble anymore with working permission, and I could work with architectural companies in the summer. Compared with my friends from former Yugoslavia, no country was in the EU back then; they were in a way more difficult situation.

Do you sometimes get described as a Slovenian artist?

Only when it comes to my biography. Workwise I'm a very Austrian sculptor. Also in Germany people see connections to the Austrian sculptors' tradition.

Regarding Slovenia, it's more the emotional connection, I speak Slovene fluently, with my family as well as with my daughter. The language also helps me to connect deeply with the scene and with the

19 Tobias Putrih (b. 1972 in Kranj) is an installation artists, lives and works between Ljubljana and Cambridge, Massachusetts.

20 Jasmina Cibic (b. 1979 in Ljubljana) works with film, sculpture, performance and installation.

21 Aleksandra Vajd (b. 1971 in Maribor) works as an academic and contemporary artist in Slovenia and internationally. Since 2008, she has headed the Fine Arts Studio (VU4) at the Department of Fine Arts (KVU) of the Academy of Art, Architecture, and Design – UMPRUM in Prague.

people I'm working with. But a real professional connection, besides visiting and meeting friends and colleagues when I go home for holidays, came only after the Triennale in 2019.²² In 2019 the curator of the Triennale was Vít Havránek, and with him I actually made not only the connection to Slovenia but also then later to Prague.

What did you show at the Ljubljana Triennale?

It was a very autobiographical work. I was showing three sculptures, three important female figures in my life: my aunt, my cousin and my mother. It felt really right to do it there. They were also all named by their first names: Marička, Marjetka and Polonca. Through the participation at the Triennale I connected with Vít Havránek, who last year, in 2023, invited me for a visiting professorship at the Academy of Fine Arts (AVU) in Prague.

How was your experience of working in Prague?

I felt very honored to have been invited. And since I had been working as an assistant at the Academy in Vienna for so long, I thought: Wow, now I can work as a professor, which probably means less work. It wasn't like that, but the Prague faculty is super-interesting. The students are unbelievably skilled, technically. It was mind-blowing how they treated the material, but unfortunately they lacked a connection to the international and contemporary art context. They were caught in the academic bubble and not going out of the school enough. I can only speak about the class that I was running. Also the connection to feminism was very much rejected. Maybe it was the result of having a male professor for so many years, and then with me as a female artist and from a younger generation than the previous professor, the change was huge. It was difficult to teach feminism and queer art. I discovered some Czech artists myself, like Eva Kmentová²³ — It's

22 9th Triennial of Contemporary Art U3. *Dead and Alive*, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana (10.10.2019–12.10.2020).

23 Eva Kmentová (1928–1980) was a sculptor and member of the artist group Trasa. Icon of the New Wave in Czechoslovakian art of the 1960s.

actually a shame to say this: It's like coming to Austria and discovering Maria Lassnig.²⁴ They never positioned themselves as feminist, but now, 50 years later, we read them as feminists. They were still working under the communist regime, doing much public art. I'm fascinated by playgrounds designed by artists, but they were not valued, and I think my students rejected them because of the accessibility. And so we had a kind of a conflict. It is interesting for me how all these things come together now. While I was teaching in Prague, I visited Vienna with my Prague students, where we saw the Skopje show at Kunsthalle Wien.²⁵ Later in Prague, I met curators from the National Gallery and they asked if I was interested in a collaboration with my students, offering us use of the educational studio at the National gallery (Trade Fair Palace) in Prague where the Skopje show travelled after Vienna. Six of these students created new works on natural and political catastrophes, inspired by what has happened in Skopje. And so actually my Prague students were involved with Skopje, connected to former Yugoslavia, my roots, through a show that first happened in Vienna. I think it was very beautiful, bringing it all together in that way. Incidentally, when I then travelled to Ljubljana there was a show²⁶ about the modernist architect Edvard Ravnikar, whom I've always had great respect for. He was also the architect of Moderna galerija. The exhibition included his proposal for Skopje. It was so well done! Seeing this show, helped in understanding former Yugoslavia and that particular time and the solidarity system from the West. Thinking about my students in Prague, who didn't only

24 Maria Lassnig (1919–2014) was a painter and filmmaker.

25 *No Feeling Is Final. The Skopje Solidarity Collection* (20.4.2023–28.1.2024), Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna; "After the massive earthquake that hit Skopje, then Yugoslavia, in 1963, there was a huge effort to help rebuild the devastated city, as a large-scale gesture of international solidarity. The decision was made to establish a museum of contemporary art as a key cultural element of the reconstruction, and thousands of works were donated to Skopje by artists from around the world.," <https://kunsthallewien.at/en/exhibition/no-feeling-is-final-the-skopje-solidarity-collection/> (accessed, 15.7.2024).

26 *The Structure of Modernity: Edvard Ravnikar and His Quests*, Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana (30.11.2023–19.5.2024).

deal with Skopje, but with their own autobiographical connections — there are Czech towns with similar histories — it was a wonderful coincidence.

Interview with IGOR ŠPANJOL about the Essl Art Award CEE¹

In 2005, the collector couple Professor Agnes and Karlheinz Essl launched the Essl Art Award CEE, which became a sustainable and well-known project for the promotion of young art students from Central and Southeast Europe. Conferred every two years by the Essl Collection between 2005 and 2015, the Essl Art Award CEE was dedicated to the discovery and support of young artistic talents from Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Turkey.²

Igor Španjol studied the sociology of culture and art history at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana. Since 1999, he has worked as a curator for the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana.³ From 2009 until 2015 he served as a jury member of the Essl Art Award for Central and Southeast Europe (2009–2015) and as the coordinator of the Essl Art Award Nominees' Exhibitions in Slovenia (2009–2015).

Igor, can you share with us the story of how the idea for the Essl Art Award came about?

Actually, it was a serious project. It started in a romantic way and it

1 The interview was conducted as part of the 2nd ARTAS workshop, taking place in Ljubljana between 21 and 22 August 2023.

2 <http://sammlung-essl.at/jart/prj3/essl/main.jart?content-id=1450654476974&rel=en&reserve-mode=active> (accessed, 6.11.2023).

3 Španjol's most important collaborative projects include: the exhibition *trilogy Slovenian Art 1975–2005* (with Igor Zabel), a series of exhibitions in the Mala galerija project space (David Maljković, Deimantas Narkevičius, Harun Farocki, Danica Dakić, Andrei Monastirsky) and Moderna galerija (MG+MSUM), such as the selection of works from the collections of Moderna galerija for the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (with Zdenka Badovinac and Bojana Piškur, 2011–), the retrospectives of Tomaž Lavrič (2010), Marko Peljhan (2011), Marko Pogačnik (2012), Tadej Pogačar (2014), Vadim Fiškin (2015), Srečo Dragan (2016), Milenko Matanović (2018), Tobias Putrih (2021), and the latest exhibition *Art at Work. At the Crossroads Between Utopianism and (In)Dependence* (with Zdenka Badovinac, Ana Mizerit and Bojana Piškur, 2022).

ended in a romantic way. Maybe that's the beauty of it. Agnes's father sold various construction materials in the first half of the 20th century, and that's how the family business started. Then Agnes met Karlheinz Essl in a gallery in New York and they fell in love. He joined her family and continued the business, which became known as bauMax. bauMax was a chain of large stores where you could buy almost anything.⁴ It spread throughout the region of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire and eventually entered the markets of Romania, Turkey and Bulgaria. In the end I think it was in eight countries: Croatia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Turkey and Romania. Each of these had one member on the jury for the Essl Art Award, the award for young artists from these countries. That was the way these art lovers and businesspeople decided to give something back to the countries where their profits came from, because for a while these profits were quite high. However, encouraged by such trends they expanded the company too fast, and it went under, although the global financial crisis in 2008 also played a part in this.

Can you tell us more about the award itself, what was the protocol for selecting the winner?

For the first two editions only students from state academies of fine arts could apply for the award. And in the case of Slovenia, the jury member representing the country was also one of the professors from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Ljubljana, Nadja Zgonik.⁵ For these first two editions our colleague from Moderna galerija Bojana Piškur⁶ was the coordinator for the Essl Art Award Nomi-

4 bauMax AG was an Austrian chain of home improvement stores.

5 Nadja Zgonik, PhD, is an art historian and art critic. She graduated in art history from the University of Ljubljana (1988), earned her MA in 1993 and PhD in art history in 1997.

6 Bojana Piškur works as a curator in Moderna galerija in Ljubljana. She has curated numerous exhibitions, among them *Southern Constellations: The Poetics of the Non-Aligned* exhibitions (Moderna galerija Ljubljana, 2019; Asia Culture Center, Gwangju, South Korea, 2020; Drugo more, Rijeka 2021) and her latest exhibition, co-curated with colleagues from the region of former Yugoslavia, *Realize! Resist! React! Performance and Politics in the 1990s in the Post-Yugoslav Context*.

nees' Exhibitions in Slovenia, and indeed the museums of modern and contemporary art in Zagreb and Ljubljana were involved in the competitions from the very beginning, which wasn't the case for the other countries. I know that they tried to arrive at such an arrangement in Romania, but it didn't work out for a variety of reasons. The organizers were actually extremely happy with our two venues in Croatia and Slovenia, but a problem arose when the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana had to undergo renovation. It was closed for quite some time, a few years,⁷ and during that time the Slovenian venue was changed, first to the National Gallery of Slovenia, but only for one edition – I don't know why.

In the two earliest editions the organizers wanted to work with state academies and state institutions, and with prominent venues for the students' exhibitions. I don't know what it was like in the other countries in those years, because later, when I came on board for the third edition, we were a very diverse group of people, ranging from private gallerists and academy professors to freelance curators, curators from institutions, and so on.

The typical selection process for the Essl Art Award CEE started with a call for entries. After the jury reviewed all the applications, we made a shortlist of eight finalists in each country. Then the coordinators for the Essl Art Award Nominees' Exhibitions prepared the exhibition in their country. Over a two-week period all the professional jury members and some members of the Essl family who were also on the jury traveled from one venue to another, where we voted based on the actual artworks, not on portfolios or applications anymore. Every two days – another opening, another winner, another award giving. This process took place like this: online applications and the shortlisting of eight finalists in each country during the winter, and then the jury meetings and openings in May. It was always a big event when

7 Moderna galerija was closed for renovation works from September 2007 until November 2009.

we announced the winners, and of course it was also used for promoting the bauMax brand.

When did you join the jury, how was the jury structured and how did it work?

I joined the jury for the third edition of the award, when the system changed to allow private schools and private academies to participate in the competition. For this reason, the Essl family didn't want the Slovenian jury member to be from our state academy, the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Ljubljana, because of the possible conflict of interest. In my case, it was Zdenka Badovinac⁸ who suggested me as a jury member, and that's why I had this double role, which was unique for all the countries, that a jury member was also a representative of the organizer of the exhibition in the country at the same time. The president of the jury was René Block,⁹ a family friend of the Essls and a legendary art professional based in Berlin. Mr. Block organized the work of the jury, and I remember these discussions as very productive. We were very different people in terms of age, background, and experience, but I have to say that we worked very well together as a jury. And the conditions for our work and for the students participating in this were perfect. It's like that when you have money and can afford to hire professionals. The Essl Museum had a great collection, good curators, good archives and a good restoration department, all the necessary ingredients for a good institution. Let me also mention that there was always a member of the family on the jury, and Mrs. Essl had the option of an additional award being made by "special invitation."

8 Zdenka Badovinac is a curator and writer, who served as the director of Moderna galerija in Ljubljana between 1993 and 2020. Since 2011, Moderna galerija is comprised of two locations: the Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova. Badovinac is the founder of the Artest 2000+ Collection and curator of numerous exhibitions.

9 René Block is a Berlin-based curator and gallerist. From 1997 to 2006 he served as the director of the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel, where he curated a number of notable exhibitions. Among them was the Balkan Trilogy series, including the exhibition *In den Schluchten des Balkan* (2003).

Did the Essl family try to influence the jury or did they always agree with it?

Of course, the family wasn't always happy about the winners, but they accepted the autonomy of the jury, and they trusted Mr. Block. He was actually the one who had to explain the jury's decisions to the family. And since there was the additional award that I just mentioned, the family still had some influence, as well as the opportunity to buy works from shortlisted finalists for their collection, without the jury getting involved.

What was the actual award in the Essl Art Award CEE?

I think the award for the artists was 1,500 euros, which was a huge amount in Romania, and in Slovenia so-so, but still okay. The jury spent enormous sums on our travels and maybe that was a bit problematic, because it could have been organized differently, and maybe more money could have been dedicated to the awards and the young artists themselves. At the end of each year, after the winners had been selected in all of the countries, another exhibition was staged in the Essl Museum, located in Klosterneuburg, Austria, where all the winners from all the countries participated in a group show. For many of the young artists that was the first time they entered the art scene at a higher professional level. For example, Jiří Švestka¹⁰ from Prague was also a jury member, and he always tried to find some interesting young artists for these activities. And Mr. Block, who was an advisor for some gallerists in Germany, was always aware that this was a good opportunity to discover some young artists who looked like they had an interesting future, and to introduce them to the business.

Did all the nominees enter the Essl Collection, or just the winners?

The winners and some of the nominees who were chosen by the family. For the latter, this didn't happen in every country, there was

¹⁰ Jiří Švestka is a curator and gallerist. In 1995 he founded the Jiri Švestka Gallery, whose mission is to promote Czech and Central European contemporary and modern art.

no fixed rule. Probably the family had a certain budget for each year. When the jury started the tour, it was usually in Ljubljana, and this was unfortunate for the nominees from Slovenia, because the jury didn't know what to expect in the other seven countries and didn't want to spend the money they had too fast, because there was always the possibility that something better would come up later. And then at the end of the tour, in Istanbul, there was often quite a lot of money left, so more things were bought there.

From a personal point of view, how do you see your experience related to the prize? Was it also an opportunity for you to learn more about contemporary art from these countries and get in touch with young, emerging artists?

Yes, I learned a lot and met a lot of people. But it's always tricky when you work with online applications, portfolios, and archives. Whenever the jury visited a country, we had a great program organized by our hosts, visiting all the other galleries and museums. And I remember one time in Hungary we visited a private gallery with some beautiful, beautiful drawings on the walls. But very fragile, very special. And we were all like, "Wow, such a beautiful exhibition, a great artist, who is the artist?" And the gallerist told us that the artist had applied for the award, but we hadn't selected her that year. That was quite painful, but that's how it is. You select artists online, believing that you've done your best, and then you come to the venue where you can finally see the artworks in real life, and they're maybe not what you'd expected, and that's frustrating. But those are the sad exceptions, luckily there are other examples of nominees who went on to become really successful, entering big exhibitions like Documenta, Manifesta, and so on.

Do you think that the Essl exhibitions contributed to Moderna galerija's exhibitions program?

Frankly, from the point of view of Moderna galerija, we always had this feeling that we were not open enough with regard to young

artists, students, and collaborations with the academies, so this was a great opportunity for that. That was what we were missing in our program, and we got it in this way.

Do you think the Essl Art Award CEE had a significant impact on young artists' visibility? Did the artists who participated in the exhibitions held in Moderna galerija get more attention for their work afterwards, and did it help to jumpstart their careers?

Yes, definitely. Moderna galerija's symbolic position within our art system was really good for them, so presenting their work in this context was a unique opportunity. Slovenia is a small country, but nevertheless, it's still hard to deal with around 100 applications each time. Personally, the award was extremely important in helping me to see what was going on in Slovenia, and the quality of the works. It was clear in which direction the state academies of fine arts and the other two or three private schools were going. We knew most of the young artists' professors, their mentors, and they helped them install their works, really tried to make the exhibitions as good as possible within this context. The Essl Museum provided for all the necessary installations of artworks at the venues. Their suggestion was to use the materials available at the bauMax stores, their shops, but in practice that material was sometimes hard to use because of the specifics.

In 2015/16 the company bauMax collapsed. Do you know what happened with the Essl Art Collection and the Essl Art Award afterwards?

At the time it became clear that the company was in big trouble, which was partly due to the change in management. One of the sons became the CEO of bauMax, because Mr. Essl was almost 80. And then it soon transpired that the company was not going to survive. They tried to find some exit strategy, to split the activities of the museum and the company and find new partners for the award. The

Vienna Insurance Group¹¹ was a potential partner, since it had partly supported the award from its very beginning. The idea was for them to take it completely in their hands and finance it, but maybe not in quite the same way. The problem was that Mr. Essl wanted to keep his family name in the title of the award, he wanted it to continue to be called the Essl Art Award CEE. His condition was that even if the Vienna Insurance Group took over the financing and organizing, some symbolic trace of his family and their initiative should remain. They could not reach an agreement about that, so it all ended quite sadly. The museum was closed, I think, in 2016. The collection was offered to the state, the Ministry of Culture, but it could not be accepted as a whole, so then Strabag, an Austrian construction company, bought the whole collection. I don't know what that deal was, but that's how the real world functions, that's the world of business, that's how it goes. And that's why I said that it ended in a romantic way, just like it started.

11 From 2007 onward, the Essl Art Award CEE was powered by the main shareholder of the Vienna Insurance Group.

Interview with JIŘÍ ŠVESTKA about his curatorial and gallery practice before and after 2004¹

The gallerist Jiří Švestka has been active in the Czech gallery scene and art market since the 1990s. After returning from Germany, where he worked in Kunstverein Düsseldorf and as a chief curator of the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, he opened his first gallery in Prague in 1995. From the beginning, Jiří Švestka Gallery profiled itself as a private sales gallery focusing on Czech and Central European art as well as international artists, with participation in international art fairs. After the bankruptcy of the Prague gallery in 2014, Švestka opened a branch in Berlin, which he ran until 2017, when he decided to focus on the re-opened gallery in Prague. The new gallery focuses on a more intimate encounter with art and provides a space not only for exhibitions, but also for meetings and lectures.²

Would you please introduce yourself and talk a little bit about the beginnings of your gallery in Prague?

I studied art history and aesthetics at Charles University in Prague. I finished with my dissertation, *Expression in Art*, so it was very theoretical. Shortly after I graduated, I emigrated to Germany, where I lived for fifteen years. I worked for two years at the National Gallery in Berlin before becoming director of the Kunstverein in Düsseldorf³ and a year and a half at the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg. In 1995, I opened a gallery with my then-wife Adriana Krnáčová. At that time, she was director of the Soros Center in Bratislava and in 2014–2018 she was mayor of Prague. We found the space in Mozarteum, in Jungmannova street in Prague 1, built in 1911 by Jan Kotěra, a prominent

1 The interview was conducted as part of the 3rd ARTAS workshop, taking place in Prague between 30 November and 1 December 2023.

2 <https://jirisvestkagallery.com/en> (accessed, 5.8.2024).

3 Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf.

Czech modernist architect. It's a wonderful building, originally used as a concert hall, with the first concert in 1913 by Ema Destinová, a space with rich exhibition history — first exhibition of Jiří Kolář in 1937.⁴ After 1948, it was a recording studio of the Czechoslovak state music publishing house Supraphon.

The owner got the house back in restitution and we applied with the idea to open the gallery and we got it. The first exhibition was Matej Krén⁵ with his tower of books called *Idiom*. We sold this tower to the reconstructed Municipal Library in Prague. And there was a dispute with them, because this is a tower of books with mirrors. This sculpture has been there since 1995, still standing, and became very popular.

Until when did you stay in the Mozarteum?

Where did you move?

We stayed until 2002. The seven-year contract was ending, and the owner of the building thought that the gallery was doing economically too well for its such a low rent, even though we invested quite a bit of money in the space. We moved to Biskupský dvůr⁶ in Prague 1.

Was the intention to have a private gallery from the beginning?

Yes. The sort of private gallery I knew from Western Europe. And of course, we were a little bit naive. We did expect that the gallery from Prague would enter the international, the Western art market. Which was possible because being in Prague, we could get artists who would not be available for us for if we would be in Berlin or in London. Prague was attractive for the artists. So, we made a Dan Graham exhibition very early.⁷ One of the best was Doug Aitken's exhibition.⁸

4 *Salón na chodbě (soubor koláží)*, Divadlo D 38, Prague (September–October 1937).

5 *Matej Krén*, Galerie Jiří Švestka, Prague (23.6.–18.8.1996).

6 Galerie Jiří Švestka, Biskupský dvůr 6, Prague (2003–2014).

7 *Dan Graham*, Galerie Jiří Švestka, Prague (7.4.–23.5.1998).

8 *Doug Aitken: Diamond Sea*, Galerie Jiří Švestka, Prague (24.2.–28.3.1998).

After our show, he received Golden Lion in Venice. But very shortly, I found out that running a gallery only for contemporary art wouldn't survive here in Czechia and there were people coming to the gallery because I was organizing a big Czech Cubism exhibition in Düsseldorf before that. So there were people bringing me paintings by Czech Cubist painters for sale. And if someone is appearing at the gallery with Modigliani painting, you cannot say "I am doing only contemporary art, go away." So that was the beginning of the gallery.

Was having a private gallery something common at the time?

At that time, no. I know there was only the legendary MXM Gallery,⁹ which they closed in 2002.

What was the main focus of your gallery?

The vision of the gallery was to showcase international, living artists in Prague and educate the Czech audience at the time. We aimed to introduce them to contemporary art and also to promote young Czech artists to an international audience. To achieve this, we participated in many art fairs, combining famous international artists with Czech and Slovak artists, which helped us gain attention for them.

Did you participate in the Vienna art fairs?

Yes, we were at the first Viennafair in 2005, probably. But it was not very successful economically. The only success was that the Austrian president, Mr. Fischer,¹⁰ went to our booth, and we had a conversation for, let's say, half an hour. That was fantastic.

Did you participate also in some fairs in Eastern Europe?

There were not so many in the East. We were participating once in the art fair in Budapest.

9 Gallery MXM was founded in 1991 as one of the first commercial galleries in Czechia. The name refers to the year when the idea of establishing the gallery arose in the mind of Tomáš Procházka. After tragic death of Procházka and his wife, Jan Černý took over gallery management and continued until floods in 2002, when the gallery was brought to an end.

10 Heinz Fischer, presidential tenure: 8.7.2004–8.7.2016.

How did it work with exhibiting or selling Czech artists abroad?

Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. As far as I can remember, we had only few exhibitions outside the fairs — Milena Dopitová's solo show at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York,¹¹ as well as exhibitions of Křištof Kintera, Veronika Holcová, Markéta Othová, Jiří Černický and Kateřina Vincourová in private and public galleries in western Europe. There were certainly fewer exhibitions than I expected. It was also interesting how some artists who were very famous here, locally, didn't get any interest in the West. And the opposite. We had a big success with Kateřina Vincourová at the time. We did an Art Basel Statements show with her and sold one of her huge art pieces, an inflatable bottle of Malibu liquor, which was bigger than the booth. I think it was just before the official opening, when we sold the artwork to a private collection in Spain. After people saw that we had sold the big piece, we were also able to sell several smaller works on paper.

Speaking of art fairs, were there also other participants from Czechia? For example, at Art Basel?

Around 2000, just my gallery, three times. The first one was at Art Basel Statements, and then there were regular booths. But we also participated in many other fairs. Some fairs have been successful, some let's say less, because you spend a lot of money to go to a fair, you pay rent for the stand, transport, insurance, hotels and so on. And you need at least to get this investment back. And that didn't always happen.

Were the artists you worked with established through your gallery?

Some of them were established. At the time, I used to work with young artists, Křištof Kintera, Jiří Černický, Kateřina Vincourová. Around 1998, 1999 I was involved in the opening and exhibition

¹¹ Milena Dopitová: *Sixtysomething*, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York City (22.11.–20.12.2003).

concept of the Škoda Pavilion in Wolfsburg in Germany. Artists from the gallery circuit such as David Černý, Michael Bielický and Kateřina Vincourová were involved in the pavilion, which opened in 2000. David Černý created a sculpture, an altar of Czech-German history, Michael Bielický a spherical video, Kateřina Vincourová a cave for new car models, but a very luxurious cave. It was a valuable experience to work with a business-oriented concept and I think it was an important moment for these young artists.

Later, you also opened a gallery in Germany.

Yes, I opened a gallery in Berlin, but much later – in 2009. In 2008, there was an economic crisis and we faced financial difficulties in Prague. My idea was, “Okay, everyone has troubles now, let’s start in Berlin.” So, I lived between Prague and Berlin. We opened the Berlin gallery with a wonderful exhibition of Ioana Nemeş, the Romanian sculptor and conceptual artist. After that we had a show of Josef Bolf.¹² But the most successful show in Berlin was Krištof Kintera’s.¹³

What was the search for new artists like?

Was it visiting studios, attending graduation exhibitions?

Mostly yes, both, but not anymore. I mostly use social networks now. Before, the most important thing for me was a recommendation from another artist, an artist I trusted.

And how did you look for potential buyers abroad?

At art fairs. It’s a great opportunity to make contacts, meet new people. Especially in Basel and Miami. The international art community isn’t that big. I also had contacts from my previous work at Kunstverein Düsseldorf and Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg. I had international contacts all over the world, they were fresh, they were good. Now it’s not like that anymore, because my contacts and myself are getting older.

12 *Josef Bolf: I don't Look Now / Schau nichthin*, Jiří Švestka Berlin (29.1.–26.3.2011).

13 *Krištof Kintera: Bad News*, Jiří Švestka Berlin (26.4.–8.6.2013).

I have found that the decisions I made as a curator of public institutions in Germany are different from the decisions you have to make as an art dealer or gallery owner. You shouldn't just start with what has the potential to be sold quickly, that's wrong. It should be done to make the best show possible. It should be done in the best possible way. I still believe in that. Every work of art, even the most difficult, will find a collector.

Let's talk about the entry to EU in 2004.

Did it impact your business?

Yes, of course it did. It was much easier to go abroad with artworks. But that's more or less it. Maybe the Czech Republic was already somewhat accepted in the European community before joining the EU.

There was a promise from the European Union that there would be a new market coming up, with investments that were mainly made by Western bank institutes (Erste Bank, Bank of Germany, Bank in Vienna). What was your impression of this whole situation, how did you experience this?

I'm afraid it was more visible for the Western countries than for the countries that joined the EU later. So the really visible help for us was the customs. Nothing more, nothing less. Of course we made some important sales of Czech contemporary art to European institutions, like European Investment Bank, but only on the occasion of joining the EU. But I am not a typical Czech. I had 15 years of experience in Germany and I was really part of the international scene.

How about institutional support at the time? Was it something common? Was it available for galleries like yours?

This is very difficult. At the very beginning I was a member of the committee of the Ministry of Culture, I was an advisor. But unfortunately, it was really difficult to advise them. They didn't accept it. They didn't understand. I tried to explain to them that a commercial gallery is first of all a cultural institution, not a commercial institu-

tion. But they still think that this type of institution doesn't need any public support. Of course they give something, but not much.

Can you tell us more about your participation in the Essl Award committee?

I don't remember exactly, but I think the first Czech member of the committee was Jiří Ševčík.¹⁴ After that, Pavel Liška,¹⁵ who was the director of House of Arts in Brno. They both resigned, and Liška suggested that I should take over. And I did, for a long time – 10 years, more or less. It was a great experience.

As a curator in big institutions, I had to discuss shows with the board of directors, the representatives and various committees. As a private gallerist, I didn't need to discuss this with anyone, I made my own decisions. And in the committee of the Essl Art Award, I again had to present arguments for or against an artist. I had to discuss this with an international committee of ten experienced and smart members. It was a really good experience. The Essl Award meetings usually lasted two weeks. We visited each venue and many studios in Romania, Slovenia, we went everywhere. It's a pity that it doesn't exist anymore; it was a great opportunity for many young artists. For example, Anna Hulačová and Kateřina Šedá, Karíma Al-Mukhtarová had their first international appearances thanks to the Essl Art Award.

I think my participation in the jury was also good because I had a slightly different perspective than the others. There were mainly curators from public institutions. I was one of the few from a private gallery. Of the private ones, René Block comes to mind. I really miss

14 Jiří Ševčík (1940–2022) was Czech art theorist, curator and pedagogue. He was a main curator in the Prague City Gallery (1989–1993), director of Collection of Modern Art in National Gallery Prague (1993–1996), lecturer at Academy of Fine Arts (1995–2013), cooperated with Gallery MXM or Austrian Cultural Forum, and was a member of the international jury for the Essl Award.

15 Pavel Liška (1941–2021) was an art historian, art critic and pedagogue. He was a director of the House of Arts, Brno (1997–2001), scientific director of Kunstforum Ostdeutsche Galerie, Regensburg (2001–2004) and rector of Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague (2007–2011).

those discussions because they were at a very high level – for example Igor Španjol from Ljubljana, Vanja Babić from Zagreb or Maria Vasilieva from Sofia.

project participants:

ARCHIVE OF FINE ARTS, PRAGUE

The Archive of Fine Arts collects materials on contemporary art, primarily Czech and Slovak visual art. The processing of documents and information is developed, implemented, and operated on the freely accessible database system — abART.

<https://en.isabart.org/>

BASIS WIEN, VIENNA

Founded in 1997, the archive and documentation centre basis wien has a unique collection of artists' materials, publications, and written material on art and art reception, as well as various other objects that have been created in the context of contemporary art in and from Austria.

The collected objects and documents are regarded as traces of exhibitions and their reception, as well as of biographical and institutional practices. They are collected, preserved, and archivally indexed, and can be found via the online database, which was launched in 1999.

<https://www.basis-wien.at/>

MODERNA GALERIJA, LJUBLJANA

Moderna galerija's Archives Department was founded in 1971. It systematically follows exhibitions in Slovenia, and collects, systematizes, and classifies biographical and bibliographical data on Slovenian visual artists, photographers, designers, architects, art critics, curators, and theorists. Since 1989, data on exhibitions and artists have been digitized in the RazUme database.

<http://razume.mg-lj.si/index.php?lang=en>

All three archives are partners of EAN (European-art.net), a network of contemporary art archives. EAN's aim is to connect art archives across Europe and provide access to their specific collections, regardless of location. Through a central search engine, European-art.net links all partner databases, making available a wide range of data on artists and their activities, as well as sources such as photographs and texts. European-art.net provides

a single point of access to the wealth of information held by art archives. It is intended for artists, curators, researchers and anyone interested in the specific collections of art archives in the 21st century.
<https://european-art.net/>

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