

REARVIEW MIRROR
Christopher Eamon

In a rearview mirror
I suddenly saw
the mass of the cathedral in Beauvais;
large things inhabit small, briefly.

- Adam Zagajewski
(*Rearview Mirror from Going to Lvov*, 1985; translated
by Marysia Pilatowicz)

Although the poet and essayist Adam Zagajewski, who emigrated from Silesia in South Western Poland to Paris in 1981, is of an older generation than the artists presented in *Rearview Mirror*, some of his writings dovetail with themes in the exhibition. While this exhibition does not foreground emigration, nor cultures 'in transition,' ideas applied in broad strokes to the entire Eastern Bloc in the 1990s as these nations transformed themselves, in some instances with 'help' of Western powers¹ into capitalist societies, other ideas that one found in Zagajewski's poetry are more pertinent than ever. Cultural production was not insulated from change and, while most of the artists in this exhibition came of age during capitalist times, they also experienced both the Socialist period and the so-called years of transition. In this way, Zagajewski's invocation of the rearview mirror is still relevant more than twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, since the socialist period seems almost imaginary for many of the artists included

¹ After former Communist leaders in Bulgaria were democratically elected on a platform of moderation, student groups' protests turned to outright revolt aided by material support from the CIA. William Blum, *Killing Hope - U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II*, (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press) pp. 314-31.

in this exhibition. In much of his writing, the town of his birth, Lvov in Eastern Poland, has an almost entirely imaginary character. (Zagajewski would have only heard of it from his parents as the family moved to Gliwice in the south when he was an infant). The writer's refrain, a call to an imaginary place, which is nevertheless still present for him, is a function of the rearview mirror to which the title of this exhibition refers. Shared experiences, even long past ones loom large, at times, in the imagination.

For most of the artists included in this exhibition the idea of the East is a Western fabrication, based on an outmoded Western imaginary. Although the Yalta Agreement signed between Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin in the Crimea in February 1945 produced it, in a very real sense there is no longer an Eastern Europe. After 1945, the new Eastern border of Western Europe seemed to fall arbitrarily where it did, based on the Soviet push into Poland and Romania in 1944. Thus, the former centre of Europe (the geopolitical area of the fallen Habsberg empire) fell under the Soviet sphere of influence, creating an East and an idea of Eastern Europe that came to define it for the next 45 years, stretching from the three Baltic States in the north to the Balkans in the south. Culturally speaking, of course, there was another reality beyond the monolithic socialist culture one imagined, one that several generations thought unalterable, at least in their lifetimes, until the events of November 1989.

Rather than classify Easternness in the way that was attempted in various other exhibitions organized on the 10th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, such

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as *After the Wall* at the Moderne Museet (Stockholm) and *Beyond Belief* at the Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago), *New Europe, New Video* at the Renaissance Society (Chicago) and Harald Szeeman's *Blood and Honey* at the Essl Collection (Vienna), this exhibition focuses on a new generation of artists and their practices. Based not on geopolitical location, but on the manner in which the artists work, the exhibition foregrounds more experimental approaches in non-traditional media. They often use objects in a conceptual manner and there is a plethora of film and video work. As a practical matter, there is no 'pure' painting nor sculpture, nor any 'straight' photography in this exhibition and it does not claim to be representative or encyclopedic of art of the East; some countries are not even represented.

Culturally speaking there is not a lot in common between, let's say, Poland and Kosovo, or even Poland and a closer neighbour such as Romania for that matter. Indeed borders drawn after WWI and redrawn after 1945, outline specific political and cultural histories, and artists in these countries reacted differently to various factors, such as the chilling influence of the Stalinist period and the effects of 'the thaw' that were to occur to varying degrees after his death. To point out one of the many divergences in these histories, in Romania, after an initial short period of thaw the dictator Ceausescu brutally clamped down on citizens consolidating his power using Socialism as a convenient smoke screen. A similar story could be told of Albania, as the two countries became the most totalitarian of Eastern Bloc states during a period in the 1970s when many of the others had opened up. Hungary went relatively far

and became open to Western investment in a new system often referred to as "Goulash Communism."² During this period a great number of artists referred to by historian Piotr Piotrowski as "neo-avant-garde" artists flourished in a way that a previous generation of avant-garde artists could not have. In each case these artists and groups were conceptually oriented, and often performance-based and situation specific. And many, as with the complex scene of Yugoslavian conceptual artists of the period (see Eric in this volume), radical critique and conceptualism were tolerated but not particularly supported by authorities in state galleries or museums.

Indeed the fact that Piotrowski himself is referred to in each of the essays in this volume is a testament to the fact that complete comparative art histories of 20th century East-Central Europe are rare. Piotrowski's *In the Shadow of Yalta* has been the most influential one to date to be translated. His mandate is to maintain the similarities among the art histories of the region, but also to elucidate the differences among them and also the differences between them and the West. Among the post-Yalta conference states, Piotrowski maintains a detailed and complex analysis of differences and similarities in the political conditions and changes in artistic scenes across the decades, from the interwar period to the late 1980s. Differences and similarities in artistic movements, trends, relative concentrations, degrees and modes of resistance

² Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009) p. 274.

and acceptance are traced synchronically and through time. The tension between universality and the particular becomes a big hinge in this and in texts by other historians during the 1990s as Europe expands its, at least, notional border to the East.

During this period, many Eastern curators and intellectuals stress a seeming paradox between a universalizing point of view in art history, *vis à vis* being part of a larger European history, and what one could call a marginalizing point of view with respect to local or specific histories and/or identities that they claim need to be maintained so as not to erase significant differences or to subsume the local into the universal. This position, stressed repeatedly, derives from the unnecessary assumption that one cannot maintain both positions simultaneously. Inside *and* outside, the West as a centre and an East with its own centre—a need for both marginalizing and universalizing discourses persists. As Edit András writes in her contribution to the *After the Wall* exhibition catalogue: "The globalized art scene of the multicultural '90s is showing less and less tolerance toward the aggressive claim of European cultural superiority, its identification with absolute values, with so-called 'universal' art, the expansive and exclusive claim of its civilization's norms and values, and their authoritarian imposition as the only possible canon."³ Writing in 1999,

³ Edit András, "High and Low: a Painful Farewell to Modernism" in *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999) p. 126.

one might well have spoken of the actual expansion of the "New Europe" given the changes in EU membership that were in store. The EU expansion can be thought of now as a blanket term used chiefly to mask local differences and tendencies (including a blindness to corruption and cronyism) in the name of an often-faceless Western corporate takeover of vast portions of the economies of East-Central Europe. Nearly a decade later, theoretician Boris Groys will argue the same issue in discussing the relation of art to Europe's geo-political expansion. He argues that the notion that true artwork is both universal and alien is part of what makes European art European.⁴ It's what makes Europe Europe and in so arguing he makes the case for the necessity of otherness within its matrix, which is not an altogether damning notion. Maintaining both the universal and the marginal (or particular) at once together is both possible *and* necessary.

While attempting to maintain two seemingly contradictory notions in balance, keeping both in sight at the same time, one can see a number of themes emerging in the exhibition *Rearview Mirror*. These can be grouped into five main groups: stealing, appropriating or claiming space; an attraction to popular culture as expressed in some of the globally dominant entertainment industries; investigations of modernity and/or modernism; acting as pranksters or otherwise mythologists; and a revisiting of conceptualism that takes it to the street—to other imagined publics.

⁴ Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge: MIT Press Books, 2008) p. 178.

The artist team Anetta Mona Chisa and Lucia Tkáčová and the Bulgarian artist Ivan Moudov take the notion of stealing and laying claim to a space quite directly. In the works *Private Collection* by the former and a series of works entitled *Fragments*, by the latter, these artists literally steal from others in the international art circuit. For the Czech and Slovak artists, everyday objects of low value have been lifted from various high-profile commercial art galleries. Accumulated over a number of years, the collection continues to grow and not without incident. A noted Viennese gallerist anecdotally charged into one of their exhibitions in order to regain his stapler. This work and others by these artists investigate power in the art world and in political spheres. Their *Manifesto of Futurist Woman: Let's Conclude* wryly brings into focus a critique of the centre from what others may call the margins like other pranksters in this exhibition, including Moudov whose fragments of stolen artworks complement this notion.

In Moudov's case, the *14:33 Minutes of Priority* and other works such as his traffic police performances, assume the authority with which one is empowered when one drives in the inner lane of a European traffic circle. In these traffic cop performances he takes on authority by simply acting as a traffic cop. In Vienna and other locations where he has performed this, his action comes not without its dangers. By inhabiting the vest and costume of the traffic police, the artist takes on the visible authority and his actions enact a clear display of it; performativity in its truest sense. His *Fragments* on the other hand take the visible form of Duchamp's *Boîte en Valise*, which included

miniaturized versions of his past artworks in a kind of act of self-cannibalization. Moudov's cases contain actual artworks, or rather fragments of original artworks, most of which were made from found objects in the first place. As fragments, the material reverts to valuelessness in a reversal of the elevation that is bestowed upon the found object when it is selected as a work of art. Moudov's double take undermines and lays bare an operation that is omnipresent in contemporary art and also begs questions as to the validity of cultural valuations based on access and potential privilege.

Claiming space as in *14:33 Minutes of Priority* can be quite literally a land grab, or in other hands a metaphor. Much of the work of Serbian artist Dušica Dražić involves land, land left to the side, marginalized or otherwise forgotten spaces. Normally, working as a performance-based artist, she takes over space both indoors and out over a period of time. Her video *Young Serbians* takes a randomly banal stretch of highway as site for an impromptu-style video remake of David Bowie's "Young Americans". Her countryman Igor Eškinja visually creates space in his work and through a series of trompe l'oeil applications of simple materials, sometimes everyday objects, furniture and other 'non-art' materials are arranged in a space that is created through geometric extension (in the mathematical sense). His Italian titled work in this exhibition translates as "Free the Mind, Claim Space" thus tying the work to a kind of liberation.

As seen with Moudov, the act of pranksterism can have revelatory effects. As a form of barely veiled social critique,



the artist's joke can wield a kind of power. Sislej Xhafa, an artist who has lived and worked in London and various parts of Italy for several years before settling in New York, is a strong example. His sculptural work *Ali Hamadou*

Sislej Xhafa
Ali Hamadou, 2002
Collection Fondazione Teseco, Pisa
Courtesy of the Artist © Sislej Xhafa
Photo: Gronchi

(2002) is particularly poignant. Italy, as one of the closest European countries to Malta and North Africa, is a stepping stone for many immigrants from Africa. Xhafa's sculpture, made for a private industrialist's foundation in black fiberglass, pictures an oversized Senegalese business man (his name is as common in Senegal as John Smith is in English speaking countries). Ironically, the monumental sculpture must always be kept in the dark. It is housed without lighting in a warehouse near the owner's factory. Similarly, his work *Padre Pio*, which is included in this exhibition, was originally shown in San Lorenzo, Italy close to Pietralcina where the historical Padre Pio lived. Revered as a near saint, shrines there invite massive pilgrimages. Xhafa created an enlarged portrait of the Catholic father so that visitors could literally get inside his head, where, if they like, they can light candles to him.

This provocation is none other than a challenge to notions of the master narrative of Western culture and Western art history—a direct challenge. The modernity that has not really passed and the type of modernism that, in the Western academy, seem an omnipresent subject for every art student and historian is largely a straw-man of an idea in a world where high-speed networks and global interaction make such concepts antiquated. And yet, the seemingly universalist discussions of modernism break down from region to region and country to country. Some of the most effective communications of the subtle relationships to particular forms of modernism have come from painter and filmmaker Wilhelm Sasnal and artist David Maljković. The former's paintings range widely, signifying the 1960's space race, a fascination with machinery and mining, a ski



jump, and other images from his youth painted with a stark and enigmatic simplicity. His body of film work, however, draws not only on Polish film and television, but often times the American west, as in road movies and, in the case of the work included in this exhibition, footage probably taken from YouTube. The melancholic nature of this work is not due to a lost and mysterious past, but rather comes from a contemplation of what one had thought one had known.

Maljković, on the other hand, wants to salvage for historical memory some of the built environments of the former Yugoslavia, for unlike most other places in the east, save for Poland, its futuristic art and architecture, mostly of the geometrically abstract variety, was not only embraced in the country but exported. Yugoslav architects built for sites of world expositions and, in Zagreb itself, its own fair grounds. It has been written about Maljković, that this

teasing out of the past from the position of an imagined future speaks of a particular form and an historical relation to the modernist style. His works speak to historicity itself, a phenomenon of modernity. *Out of Projection*, presented here, is one of his first works not to invoke modernist monuments or architecture. In it he presents past Peugeot cars of the future cared for as if the most precious of artworks, while the actual, now-aged designers and engineers that created them look on as if frozen time, an ode to history and our temporal existence.

Deimantas Narkevičius, Taras Polataiko, Dénes Miklósi each in their own way challenge the universalizing tendencies of modernism from within the history of late modernity through an analysis of their respective media. Polataiko's paintings are impure reflections of paintings photographed then printed graphically and then repainted probably with other photographs as source material.

Dénes Miklósi
a is not identical with itself, thus a is not identical with a, 2003
 Courtesy of the Artist © Dénes Miklósi

A meditation on mediation perhaps. They are also the only works in the exhibition that draw directly on the Russian avant-garde, specifically, Kasimir Malevich and the earliest promises of revolution and revolutionary art. (Interestingly, one of Anna Molska's pieces that came out of the famed Kowalski studio, *Tanagram* (2006-07), which examines a similar moment of Russian art history appear as stills in the background of her work *Peers*.) And yet Polataiko's pieces are not reduced to the images of paintings pictured in them in so much as they speak to history and the passage of time, much in the way that the work of Deimantas Narkevičius does. As a senior figure in the Lithuanian cultural scene, his many videos have analyzed the 'transition' in his country and also the way video is used as the documentarian's format. In *The Dud Effect*, as a former Russian officer reenacts the procedures for launching intercontinental ballistic missiles, we see the artist's enigmatic approach to his work emerge. A slowly paced action unfolds as if it were an historical document while in actuality it takes place in the present of the video acted out by actual historical participants. The poetry of the scene, mystery and a pervading sense of the past are felt through the present tense of mimesis. As an experimental and conceptual artist who was working in photography as early as the 1980s, Miklósi basically worked in a vacuum. His work demonstrates an incredibly individualist interest in some of the key approaches of high Post-Modernism, as seen in his photo series *a is not identical with itself, thus a is not identical with a* (2003).

His film, *The Life of Jesus* is, not only an example of appropriation in its purest form, but also a reflexive analysis

of the role of the audience to which Miklósi's use of a mirror attests. The film, all 90 minutes are in Super 8, was meant to be used as a tool for Presbyterian missionaries. Here, Miklósi functionally turns the presumed usage from one of indoctrination to one of self examination.

From the appropriations of Sasnal through to Miklósi a thread can be drawn, as they venture nearer and nearer to popular imagery (as certainly *Untitled (Elvis)* by Sasnal does). Two of the artists revel in this imagery. Ciprian Mureşan who seems to be drawn as much to children's toys, games and childlike imagery as he is to the brutally savage world of adults. His 90-second remake of Luis Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1923) selects only the most horrific part, the famous eyeball scene, recreated with absolute perfection, with characters from the 3D blockbuster *Shrek* taking the position of Bunuel's actors. His literally all-dark puppet show, (all the animal puppets are fabricated from black plush) tells a sordid history of mankind's violence. With words describing both medieval and modern types of torture from 'the rack' to waterboarding—the dark children's theatre enacts a kind of contest for the worst in human history.

Fellow Romanian artist Alex Miritzui's practice is mainly performance-based and photographic. His video *Pop*, included in this exhibition, is perhaps exceptional of his work in the sense that he appears in it only marginally; his hand turns the pages of the British fashion magazine *Pop*. Slowly, page after page, a narrative of imagery emerges, a found narrative that is at once appropriation and meditation. Most of Miritzui's work is based on gender

and gender transformation. In many ways, as a kind of body artist, he is the closest of his generation to one of the lone heroes of the Romanian art scene, the conceptual and body artist of the 1970s Ion Gregorescu. While Gregorescu is almost a lone figure in Romanian history, his work is still very much of a piece with international task-based, performance and body art. Miritzui does not in any way ape this 1970's form. Rather, he 'queers' it in an altogether different way.

Modernism and the past, the present and its ghosts, one could say even the anxiety of influence runs, through many of the works in the exhibition. Anna Molska has already been mentioned in terms of her works from the historical Kowalski studio (Althamer was also student of this studio in the art academy) and indeed there is a strong modernist lineage running from Kowalski back to the constructivist Ryszard Stanislawski, an artist and the founder of the earliest abstract art museum in Europe (Museum Sztuki, Łódź) via 1970s conceptualist Edward Krasinski. Kowalski himself was a kind of performance/painter coming out of Art Constructiv. Molska seems to want to reject all past influences in her piece *Peers* as each of the supposed important influences in her life are rejected in the first person. She includes in it everything she hates, including birds and harp music.

Another Polish artist with a great desire to reject and clarify, Anna Ostaya, takes aim at the linearity of supposed influence in a daring and highly eclectic approach to her work. Rejecting notions of style and/or of branding she works in both a conceptualist way, by collecting daily

newspapers, *and* as a painter of a highly skilled or, one might even say, a studiously de-skilled way to invoke various points in painting history while copying none of them. She draws on diverse media and the history of thought in writing, specifically of the Polish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman. In her work *Artist interested in a theory of modernity*, modernism appears whimsical if not downright slight. In it, a kind of monolith, a flat-topped obelisk is painted a banal grey—the same as three other works in the grouping. It is crowned with the type of small plastic bag that you get at the corner store, blown slightly by a small fan. The work's decidedly un-monumental character is the point here and the theory to which she is drawn is manifest in it.

Gintaras Didžiapetris work is similarly unique and eclectic. For him even the notion of repeating an idea or an exhibition is an anathema. His work partakes of a type of conceptualism that in some sense combines histories of surrealism, of the critique of institutions and of language-based forms, as it forges into ever-experimental territory. The group of works included here originated in an exhibition in Vilnius, *Parodos or Exhibitions*, which included a room with only curtains and gallery lighting, followed by another room with a pedestal on which a plate with the image of a key hole (an important element in surrealist painting and film of the 1920s), and a metal version of the S-curve found on base violins, which was printed ironically on the back of a female torso in Man Ray's *Le Violin d'Ingres* (1924). The S-curve hangs in the space such that its shadow marks a wall. Finally, in the tradition of MCA's *Art by Telephone* exhibition, an object

from a previous exhibition was included. In this case, a copper vase was selected by a curator at Artist's Space, New York, who had been asked by the artist to pick something randomly for the exhibition on the way to the gallery. The iteration of *Parodos for Rearview Mirror* will be decided on site. The metal S-curve will probably be replaced by a paper one. The plate and curtain will probably be included, but of the rest we are uncertain at the time of this writing. Didžiapetris is forming himself as he goes along in an approach to exhibitions of his own making. In the vein of Marcel Broodthaers, the poet and filmmaker turned artist, Didžiapetris' enigmatic work carves new territory and challenges institutionalized relationships with viewers over time; it also challenges received notions of spectatorship as it revels in the Duchamp effect in unexpected ways.

If the unintended effect of some this art is to evoke histories of modernism this is probably due in general to the unprogrammatic nature of the artists and works included in this exhibition. None of them possess a hint of the doctrinaire, which cannot always be said of some of their predecessors on either side of the iron curtain, post or pre-1989. Katarina Zjdelar's work however has a clear point of departure. Each work can be traced to another. She is interested in language and how it works in the immigrant experience. Most of her works in video in one way or another speak to this topic. *A Perfect Sound*, included here, sounds unintentionally like a modernist piece of music based on what seems to be an atonal composition issuing from the galleries. Perhaps it is a duet in twelve tones? Perhaps a new experimental composer? When in front of the screen, between the spaces (the image goes black from

time to time) one can discern that a speech coach (this one from Manchester; we don't need to know) is helping a young man de-accent his speech. The sounds need to be copied exactly, but poetry exists in the young man's uncertain ability to do so.

Various nations in the 1970s saw forms of conceptualism emerge and while most of the artists in this exhibition have departed greatly from any textbook notion of conceptualism, their brands of post-conceptualism, to which this entire exhibition is dedicated, have been unique expressions of a generation if not a group of artists. Roman Ondák is, of course, the artist most tied to conceptualism proper as his performances can be read as deriving quite directly from the instruction-based performances of Fluxus bleeding into 1960's Conceptual Art, and yet his actions tend to be smaller, more modest and they involve the street. His work, which features a child and wife as though taken from a newspaper, caught in the background of a journalist photo, and his work with communities of children attest to this fact, as does the performance *Stray Man*. Almost indistinguishable from the crowd, *Stray Man's* enactment may not be announced. Perhaps only a video will be the trace of him. The man looking in the window is a curious figure; perhaps he is intimidated by the gallery.

The modesty of Ondák's works seeks not to intimidate but to engage with its simplicity. This homage to the street basically opens this exhibition to the outside as one moves into the gallery from *Stray Man* to encounter Ján Mančuška's, *Record II*, a literal record of a dirt road

with tire tracks. We are reminded of proto-conceptualist works such as in some of Jasper Johns' paintings and Robert Rauschenberg's famous tire track in India ink. The record is an exact index of a location. In this case it is not a location of note. It could be of any country road, any place in the world, but it is recorded for the sake of posterity. It is as specific as are all indices, but also it is of no particular place. It is not unlike some of the work of Pawel Althamer who takes the community and the street and literally weaves stories around them. *Guma* who appears in this exhibition as a standing portrait is made of rubber. Guma means rubber in Polish. The sculpture is alternately entitled *Monument to Mr. Guma*, the wobbling street drunk who used to habituate the storefront where Althamer holds art workshops for local youth. His disappearance and probable death initiated the kids' wish to make a memorial to him. Althamer acts as almost an outsider artist in the degree to which he insists on his 'alien' nature. He lives in the projects where he grew up and maintains his life there, producing a kind of conceptualism of the street. Althamer truly sees himself as an alien within Europe. In fact, in a number of his works he literal enacts this alienation by dressing in a silver or gold, space suit. He has even created a makeshift flying saucer. *Guma* represents a specific life immortalized as a life-sized rubber monument. Taken together perhaps these two bodies of work can be seen as a synecdoche for the 'new Europe.'

The artists in *Rearview Mirror* are in a way exemplary of this notion that the universality claimed by Western Europe (and the West in general) has been, or is being, replaced, that this 'new' old Europe necessitates one to hold

the universal and the particular together. The new artists represented here present a more complicated view of art from some Central-Eastern European countries. Indeed, all of the artists in this exhibition work in a 'post-conceptual' manner, embracing objects and creating spaces while imbuing them with new significance. Their approach to art making is what brings them together in this context, not their nationality. An exhibition such as this could include artists from many places, but the focus here on Central and Eastern Europe serves to highlight some of the work being produced in this large and diverse region. In this respect *Rearview Mirror* also addresses complicated, if not contradictory, understandings of change and transition, in contrast to an overly present, under-examined notion of progress. This new generation of artists that, while exposed to models of art making dominant in the West, are neither beholden to these models, nor working specifically to reject them. In other words, the artists in this exhibition are not to be viewed chiefly in relation to the West, but rather as working through their own experience and aesthetic interests that derive from a variety of sources, histories and geographies.

Christopher Eamon
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