

organize many exhibitions and art events, and from 1983 to 1985 put out eleven issues of *Aktuális Levél* [Artpool Letter], an independent *samizdat* art journal that continues to serve as the sole documentary source on the Hungarian non-official art of those years and its international contacts.

The relation to Communism is open even in the works of **Vyacheslav Akhunov** [b. 1948, lives in Tashkent, Uzbekistan], an artist, writer and philosopher, who since the 1970s has been reworking the experiences of 1970s Moscow conceptualism from a peripheral position in Tashkent. His many notebooks are filled with drawings, texts and sketches for unrealized and un-realizable projects. These projects deconstruct the language of political rhetoric, push the aesthetics of Soviet propaganda to the limits, and open up a number of questions that go beyond an ironic subversion of the ideological apparatus.

The exhibition **Hungry Man....** is in no way an overview of heterogeneous production of artists' books in Eastern Europe, and it does not take statistics as its politics of representation. It rather suggests a kind of discontinued geographical and temporal journey that looks at Eastern Europe along the lines of a question posed by Romanian philosopher **Ovidiu Tichindeleanu**: "For what point is there in a discussion about East European debates on communism if not to look there for a renewal of the left theoretical tradition?"⁰⁵ The exhibition proposes to read artists' books and publications in Eastern Europe within the context of artistic practices that since the early 1960s have questioned the modernist canon and looked for ways of control over production and distribution of art on the horizon of emancipatory political struggles that transformed the world on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The point is not to define some *differentia specifica* of artists' books production in Eastern Europe, as something stemming out of resistance to official art and social repression in the name of artistic freedom and autonomy, or as delayed reverberations of artistic practices born within artistic centers of the West, but to complicate and refine the vision of modernity that does not belong exclusively to the West.

The traditional categories of East and West seem today too simple to explain the geopolitical complexity that has emerged from the reterritorialization of capital in the last decades. The 'unity' achieved with the dissolution of 'Communist totalitarianism', as Eastern Europe is understood through hegemonic and triumphal Western

rhetoric, did not cancel economic, symbolic, and organizational differences. Nor did this rhetoric change dominant discourse that defines relations through terms of center and periphery or historical delays.

Dan Perjovschi's [b. 1961, lives in Bucharest, Romania] graffiti-like drawings on the streets, on walls of exhibition spaces, and often on the pages of books, have at their core an interest in the ubiquitous processes of transformation in a post-Communist society. They create complex connections between everyday life, political programs and cultural self-understanding. They often comment on fundamental changes in the meaning of social and political concepts in Eastern Europe since 1989 through the lenses of inconsistencies of the contemporary art system.

With regards to art history, Eastern Europe paradoxically did not exist during the Cold War except as a cliché of ideological instrumentalization of artistic autonomy. It has been established only today, when the tasks of mapping its artistic history, processes of its historization, and construction of its narrative, are well under way. What is still at stake is a need to rethink the West away from its own hegemonic self-narrative and to lay open the ways in which it still remains determinative in economic relations and the conditions of artistic production. Apart from that, Eastern Europe as a homogenous cultural space does not exist, and any attempt to reduce its cultural, artistic and socio-cultural circumstances to a uniform conception is problematic. The Russian writer duo of **Ilf and Petrov** faced a parallel challenge and bravely embraced it when in 1936 they visited USA as an official delegation of Soviet writers. America kept eluding them. Wherever they traveled, from New York to Washington or Hartford, they would learn from the local residents that this was still not the genuine, real America.

"Some said that the genuine America was the southern states, while others affirmed that it was the western ones. Several didn't say anything but vaguely pointed a finger into space."⁰⁶ With regards to the position of an Eastern European artist, **Dan Perjovschi**

expressed it the most succinctly in one of his drawings⁰⁷: "Mid nineties I represented East Central Europe, end nineties I was coming from East Europe, at the end of the millennium from South East Europe, and now from the Balkans. I never moved from Bucharest."

The humor of his words asks to be taken seriously. ✱

What, How & for Whom/WHW is a curatorial collective formed in 1999 and based in Zagreb, Croatia. Its members are **Ivet Čurlin, Ana Dević, Nataša Ilić** and **Sabina Sabolović**, and designer and publicist **Dejan Kršić**. **WHW** organizes a range of production, exhibition and publishing projects and from 2003, directs **Gallery Nova** in Zagreb. *What, how and for whom*, the three basic questions of every economic organization, concern the planning, concept and realization of exhibitions as well as the production and distribution of artworks and the artist's position in the labor market. These questions formed the title of **WHW's** first project dedicated to the 150th anniversary of the *Communist Manifesto*, in 2000 in Zagreb, and became the motto of **WHW's** work and the title of the collective. In 2009 **WHW** curated 11th **Istanbul biennial** under the title *What Keeps Mankind Alive?*.

DESIGN: Dejan Kršić @ WHW

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05 Ovidiu Tichindeleanu, *Towards a critical theory of postcommunism? Beyond anticommunism in Romania*, *Radical Philosophy*, no 159, 2010

06 Ilf and Petrov, *American Roadtrip*, Cabinet, NY, 2006

07 Dan Perjovschi, *Untitled*, 2005, screen print, Edition Block, Berlin

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Hungry Man, Reach for the Book. It is a Weapon!

curated by **What, How & for Whom / WHW** [Zagreb]
April 10 - May 22, 2010

Vyacheslav Akhunov • Karen Andreassan • Artpool • Chto Delat / What's to be done? • Ciprian Mureșan • Gorgona • Sanja Iveković • Idea Art • Dan Perjovschi • Maj 75 • Mladen Stilinović • Škart

Hungry Man, Reach for the Book. It Is a Weapon

Bertolt Brecht, “Praise of Learning”, 1931

In the project “*Ontological Landscapes*” [2009], the artist **Karen Andreassian** [b. 1957, lives in Yerevan, Armenia] together with his students in the Department of Art History and Theory at Yerevan State University, and Paris-based writer and independent researcher **Stephen Wright**, researched the post-Soviet sociopolitical metamorphoses and their effects on material and cultural transformations. Inspired by political walks that took place along Northern Avenue in Yerevan following the forceful dispersion of post-election demonstrations in Yerevan’s central Azatutyan [Freedom] Square, together they made walks that traced their personal stories and created a map of physically and mentally connected places. Their process that also references the procedures of the Soviet “factography” movement – one of the radical yet now largely overlooked art and political experiments from the 1920s – and its resulting extensive material is collected in a book of the same title that could be used as a manual for reading the post-Soviet landscape.

The practice of political walks was created as a spontaneous expression of dissent against the blatant manipulation of the results of parliamentary elections held in February 2008 in Yerevan. On March 1st, 2008, police responded to mass demonstrations with brutal force and some 10 people were killed. As a result, all the public gatherings, not just political demonstrations, were prohibited. Politically conscious citizens continued the protests by coming to the places of demonstrations and simply walking among other, non-committed walkers. This barely discernible form of protest irritates the ruling power by continuing to bubble under the surface of normalcy and by evading authority’s reach as long as it does not burst.

In the de-politicized landscape where the so-called ‘international community’ has agreed to trade democracy for the unencumbered functioning of capitalism, political efficiency of this highly original form of mass political discontent is not to be measured by its instrumentality in creating a pressure that would force new and fair parliamentary elections where a true will of the people could be freely expressed. Rather, it re-opens the possibilities of political activities in a public space.

Material collected through these actions that trace the archive of post-Soviet landscape through bodily experiences is framed as art with a ‘low coefficient of visibility’, as **Stephen Wright** would call it, in the form of arefreshingly unspectacular artists’ book. The “*Ontological Landscapes*” project utilizes the medium of the book as an attempt to revive the pedagogical and didactic function of art while trying to endow individual subjects with a heightened sense of their place within a global society.

In spite of its title, which repeats the socialist mantra that glorifies education as a condition of emancipation, and which found its well-deserved poetic form in **Brecht’s** famous poem, the exhibition **Hungry Man, Reach for the Book. It Is a Weapon** does not present artists’ books and publications that necessarily engage directly with pedagogical and didactic aspects of production. But, it does

suggest to read them as a way of addressing the problem of constituting and addressing the public, and as a critical engagement with the questions of the public sphere. The exhibition is focused on the political geography that contained the so-called “socialist states” from before the fall of Berlin wall in 1989, that ‘obscure disaster’, as **Badiou** calls it in describing a definite end of the epoch that began with the October Revolution. The exhibition presents certain case studies against the background of **Brecht’s** enlightening call that continue to persist as a historical reminders, residue, or inspiration, even when **Brecht’s** urging is rejected. The title of the exhibition is a proposal to read the presented works as results of a desire to step out of the dominant matrix of individual artistic genius and the production of objects for the art market. These works articulate, agitate, propagate and communicate critical thinking in order to imagine the consequences of new possibilities beyond the dominant state of affairs.

At the end of his text *Art in the Postartistic Age*, Polish critic, art historian and curator **Jerzy Ludwiński** states, “Perhaps, even today, we do not deal with art. We might have overlooked the moment when it transformed itself into something else, something which we cannot yet name. It is certain, however, that what we deal with offers greater possibilities”.⁰¹ His hopeful conclusion in no way envisaged how culture co-opted by capitalism would become a colony of society focused on services and consumption, and how important the functioning accorded to contemporary art in neo-liberalism would prompt its dissolution in creative industries. In the 1960s, a dream of the dissolution of art in life held much more liberating promises. For example, the neo-avant-garde group, **Gorgona**, active in Zagreb from 1959 to 1966, whose members⁰² were artists with highly distinct individual practices, collectively realized activities of unspectacular nature. They exchanged concepts and letters among its members as well as with international artists with whom they shared artistic interests [like **Manzoni**, **Rauschenberg** or **Fontana**]. Between 1961 and 1966, they published 11 issues of the anti-magazine *Gorgona*, conceived as a work of art in the print medium, where each issue consisted of a few pages designed by one artist, both from the members of the **Gorgona** group along with other artists like **Victor Vasarely**, **Harold Pinter**, and **Dieter Roth**. These issues of the anti-magazine are the best evidence of the ephemeral nature of their practice, which they understood as part of a process of searching for artistic and intellectual freedom. Their practice is today inscribed within a range of artistic experiments that during the 1960s, from a position of what later would be canonized as conceptual art, questioned the status of the art object and renegotiated the limits of art. But in the countries

01 Cited by Magdalena Ziólkowska in *From the museum on through the gallery and to the loose pages of a catalogue [and not the other way around]*, in *Invisible history of exhibitions*, special issue of Gallery Nova Newspapers, Zagreb, 2009.

02 **Gorgona** included painters **Josip Vaništa**, **Marijan Jevšovar**, **Julije Knifer**, **Đuro Seder**, sculptor **Ivan Kožarić**, architect **Miljenko Horvat** and art-historians **Radoslav Putar**, **Matko Meštrović**, **Dimitrije Bašicević** – **Mangelos**.

behind the Iron Curtain, the term ‘conceptual art’ itself was first used by **Jerzy Ludwiński** in 1970 in his project **Idea Art**, and **Ludwiński** understood it differently from his contemporaries in the West, as a broader context that takes an idea as the starting point for the realization of an artwork. In the project *Idea Art*, he invited artists to contribute material for an exhibition that takes place only in the form of a catalogue. His text was an integral part of the catalogue, where distinctions between curatorial text and artists’ contributions were cancelled.

For decades, these artworks, conceived in the form of publications, existed outside of the market circulation and were marginalized within local art histories, but are today fetishized as spaces of unlimited freedom and individual creative expression in the midst of an oppressive, totalitarian state. They certainly responded to the need to carve out an autonomous space of dialogue amidst circumstances in which the public sphere was being dominated by interests of cultural elites of the times. But the situation is not much different today, when the question of the public sphere becomes particularly acute through ongoing transformations of urban and social spaces into privatized consumerist landscapes. Here, the desire to communicate and interact, to be a constitutive part of the society, gets enclosed and cordoned off by consumption as the only mode of participation, or even as the only mode of simply spending time in the urban space. Regarding the public sphere, Slovenian writer **Marina Gržinić’s** thesis seems particularly acute, proposing that today East of Europe and West of Europe are in a relation of repetition, rather than a previous question of opposition.⁰³ But this does not mean that the prevalent understanding of post-Communist countries as a cultural space for decades cut off from Modernism and therefore in need of integration into the global capitalist system of Western liberal democracy, generally touted as ‘transition’, is changed, or that divisions and so called misbalances are simply cancelled.

The fragmentation and gradual disintegration of social life proper is reflected in the book *Auto-da-Fé* by **Ciprian Muresan** [b. 1977, lives in Cluj, Romania], both through its medium, a book, and through the process of its realization. It documents the outcome of a collective action of writing graffiti on walls throughout the cities of Romania, composed of the fragments from **Elias Canetti’s** novel *Auto-da-Fé* [1932], a story of wicked humor in which the destruction of **Peter Kien**, a scholarly recluse who lives within and for his great library, stands for the loss of the public sphere.

Books by the artist group **Škart** are embedded in their practice of experimental collective work that involves a wide range of participants in community-based collaborations that often attempt to regain the public space from which they are excluded. **Škart** was founded in Belgrade in 1990 by **Dragan Protić** and **Đorđe Balmazović**, and the self-nihilistic naming **Škart** [“rejects”] underlines the collective’s interest in marginal phenomena reappearing on the intersections of poetry, architecture, design, music and social criticism.

03 **Marina Gržinić**, Analysis of the exhibition *Gender Check – Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*, <http://eipcp.net/policies/grzinic/en>

The newspapers regularly published by **Chto delat/What is to be done?**, a collective whose name derives from a novel by the nineteenth century Russian author **Nikolai Chernyshevsky**, and **Lenin’s** political text ‘*Chto delat*’ from 1902, founded in 2003 in Petersburg by a group of artists, critics, philosophers and writers from Petersburg, Moscow, and Nizhny Novgorod, are a direct intervention that revives capacity of speech in the public sphere. The English/Russian newspapers are usually produced in the context of [Western] art exhibitions or conferences, but focus on issues central to engaged culture in depoliticized Russian intellectual environments, in relation to a broader international context. As is often the case in the countries ‘in transition’, artists and intellectuals invested with the power to speak often draw from the West their authority and independence [also in economic terms], but in regard to their practice at the intersection of political theory, art and political activism, *Chto delat’s* relation to institutions is based on the position that “it is worth getting mixed up in such relations only when we try to change these institutions themselves”.⁰⁴

This way of engagement with institutions and official systems of culture was at the background of the so called ‘new art practice’ in the 1970s in socialist Yugoslavia, which searched for alternative ways of production and presentation of art. This practice redefined the status of art and ways of its mediation, and posed radical questions about the autonomy and role of art institutions. An example is the magazine **Maj 75**, a *samizdat* collectively produced by a **Group of Six Artists** between 1978 and 1984 in Zagreb, consisting of individual works realized in A4 format and composed in a publication. **Maj 75** functioned as a platform for collaboration and as an alternative ‘exhibition space’ controlled by artists themselves, but its criticism of socialist reality was formulated not from a dissident position, but as an engagement and fight for transformation of the system of institutions, including the very institution of Art. The exposure of contradictions and cynicism of actual life in socialist Yugoslavia, in the name of a vision of society in which potentials of socialism will be fully realized, also found its expression in the books by **Sanja Iveković** [b. 1949, lives in Zagreb] and **Mladen Stilinović** [b. 1947, lives in Zagreb]. **Iveković’s** books investigate the relations between gender and power and deconstruction of dominant patriarchal models, while many books by **Stilinović** deal with relations between issues of work, poverty, laziness, power, cynicism and pain.

Yugoslavia was the most pluralist and successful of the workers’ states, and its cultural conditions were different from other socialist countries. Still, **Artpool**, an alternative cultural institution working since 1979 as an archive on officially proscribed neo-avant garde art in Hungary, was periodically banned, and yet on the whole tolerated. This suggests a more complex view of the situation of non-official art than usually imagined: Western democracy in defense of artistic freedom against the ideological instrumentalization of art in totalitarian socialist regimes. **Artpool** managed to

04 <http://www.euroalter.com/2010/practicing-dialectic-cho-to-delat-and-method/>, interview with **Dmitry Vilenski**, member of the collective