Bridges and Conflicts on the Eastern-Western Art Axis: The Domestication of Eastern Europe as 'Close Other' in the 1990s

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Towards a non-hierarchical art history

This article explores three episodes in the dialogue between Eastern and Western European art. These episodes exemplify the ways in which interpretations have been sought that would render Eastern European art more easily intelligible to the Western audience—to 'tame' it, if you will. While these episodes do not exemplify successful moments in the history of East-West understanding, their failures appear to result primarily from mistakes, misunderstandings, and incompetencies in communication between parties with different expectations, experiences and relating to different contextual milieu. The failings are therefore reciprocal: each party is active in the field of contemporary art, but each omits significant contextual variables from the interaction: historical, national, economic and cultural circumstances. The 1990s was an extremely active period of cultural engagement between East and West, and one reason for this may be the youth of the participants, who seem typically to have been from the generation that matured in the 1990s. While there is no statistical evidence about the active participants during that period, these three examples show writers in their thirties and early forties enjoying the opportunities that arrived with the fall of the Iron Curtain, which allowed for more open communication and the possibility to travel and meet in person. This was a period of great optimism, euphoria even, offering hope for a better, more open, connected and unified future for the world and especially within all of Europe.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Eastern and Western European art worlds found themselves engaged in a new political, economic and technical context. There followed many attempts to define the *avant garde* of Central and Eastern European art with the clear goal to bringing local art into contact with Western European art, and especially with art that appeared to share a spiritual or philosophical affinity, as the worldview of many Eastern European artists already incorporated or was in dialogue with ideas from contemporary and historical Western European art.

In Estonia, as in the other Soviet Republics, the so-called 'Thaw' period of de-Stalinisation from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s included limited relaxation in censorship and other

state controls of culture, thus enabling artists to lean towards the art of the West. Artists had already begun to actively seek cultural engagement between East and West before the Second World War. However, from the Western perspective, the art of Eastern and Central Europe remained essentially alien and 'Other'—although it was not perceived as alien to the same degree as non-European cultures. Piotr Piotrowski (2009b: 52) wrote that the non-European's Other was the real Other, while the Central and Eastern Europe was *not-quite-Other* or it was the 'Close Other'. Bojana Pejić (1999: 20) applies Boris Groys's *fremde Nähe* as a designation for Eastern Europe, not mentioning the source. Even now, Piotrowski's *Close Other* seems well-suited as a designation of the countries at the Eastern edges of Europe.

Although the shadow of the Other continues to hang over the remoter areas, people are generally far less concerned with the designation than in the 1990s: the West is no longer seen to be the primary figure in a top-down analysis as the economic conditions of countries in Eastern Europe has drawn closer to those in the West. The 1990s were a period of profound social and economic transition for Eastern Europe. It seems that the collaboration and affinity shared by Eastern and Western countries in the 1990s was motivated by the Eastern countries' desire for a Western way of life and for emancipation from the burden of the Soviet past. Economic health and standards of living were objectively poorer in relation to the West, especially with regards to salaries and to the local physical and social environment, which remained everywhere infused with traces of the Soviet legacy.

The self-understanding of East- and Central Europe seems closely connect to the legacy of the 1990s, a period when every interested person tried to identify with the wider international art world and to ride on the West's art train. It was perceived as vitally important that, after half a century of detachment and disruption from Western Europe, the East should re-join and reconnect with the wider European culture it had participated in before World War II. On more careful examination, the connections between Estonian art and the rest of Europe donot seem quite as close as we may have wished, but that is another story.

Toward the end of the 1920s, members of Eesti Kunstnikkude Rühm (Group of Estonian Artists—GEA) took part in an exhibition in Berlin. They had sent their *Book Of New Art*: *an Almanac Of The Group Of Estonian Artists* (1928) to Theo van Doesburg, which according to Jüri Hain (1987: 51) was received with interest. Early in the 20th century Estonian artists had often lived and studied in the West, most notably Eduard Wiiralt who remained in Paris until his death in 1954. Although Wiiralt's *Absinthe drinkers* and *Hell* may appear surrealist, there

is no documentary evidence that he ever interacted directly with the Surrealists in Paris. In this context, we should also mention an essay by Ilmar Laaban, “Syrrealism” (1938), published in the newspaper *Realist* of Tallinn’s Reaalkool (Tallinn School of Science). So, the re-opening of Estonia’s borders decades later provided Estonian artists with not so much a way back to a previous position in European art, but rather an opportunity to find their place in a different cultural, political and technological context.

The digital integration of Europe (and the whole world) is the common denominator of the 1990s. The many online discussions this has enabled should be seen as a parallel to the more traditional publication of articles and research. This new approach is clear in Piotr Piotrowski’s idea of *transnationality* (2009b: 58), by which he proposed to write a new history of the avant-garde that would focus attention on local identities and their synchronous reflections in Eastern and Central European countries. Finnish theoretician Tapio Mäkelä (1998) also writes about the importance of *translocality* as a new situation for art in which the internet becomes the glue that binds trans-local art scenes and enables collaboration.

From 1970 onwards, Piotrowski had the good fortune and privilege to be able to communicate with many Central European theoreticians from the various Warsaw Pact countries, and this enabled him to form his understanding of the art historical ostracisation of Central Europe. Piotrowski’s position then further developed when he began to communicate with colleagues from the US and Western Europe. With his concept of *transnationality*, Piotrowski has in mind Eastern and Central European phenomena that are synchronous with Western art, like Czech cubism and surrealism; and in this respect he quotes from André Breton’s 1935 lecture in Prague, in which Breton said that surrealism was evolving in Prague and Paris in parallel. (Piotrowski 2009a: 41)

The Surrealist group not only spread its artistic ideas, but deliberately exported them with a programme of internationalisation led by André Breton and Paul Éluard, which manifested in Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Sweden and England (Alexandrian 1995: 119). The history of Western art should therefore recognise the influences between countries other than those of Western Europe, including in Eastern and Central Europe. Presently, among Eastern European countries only Russia's role in the international avant-garde has been examined in depth. This is emphasised by Piotrowski (2009b) with the title of his article “Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde”. In the article Piotrowski mentions the book *Art Since 1900*, edited by Hal Foster (2004), which, while giving attention to the art of

Brazil, Mexico, Japan, Central, Northern and Southern Europe nonetheless fails to dismantle the prevailing modernist geography in art history and continues to position 20th century modern art as centrally a US and Western European phenomenon. That centred approach is what Piotrowski describes as being a form of *vertical art history*—a hierarchical approach.

From this Piotrowski (2009b) derives a contrasting concept of *horizontal art history* that is not Western-centric, and argues that the art history of Central and Eastern Europe should be understood in terms of that horizontality. Thus, histories of Central and Eastern European art should reflect the condition of national and local avant-gardes rather than being simply reflective, derivative and generally secondary, while also acknowledging the synchronicity with the West and its own cultural specificity. Ultimately, Piotrowski suggests writing a non-hierarchical and multi-perspectival art history, which is not radiating from the points of view of canonical art centres.

A reader could be forgiven for becoming confused by the many and various texts and positions that were presented in the 1990s especially. German theoretician Inke Arns suggests making a *vertical cut* through the various territorial entities and layers of culture and identity, rather than accepting a horizontal/binary approach that homogenises East and West (Arns 1999: 238). These various positions evolved during the *Hybrid WorkSpace* at the *documenta X* event in Kassel (1997) when the term *Deep Europe* first came into use. The term was introduced by Bulgarian artist Luchezar Boyadjiev and indicates areas in Europe where identities and culture are layered. According to Boyadjiev: "Europe is deepest where there are a lot of overlapping identities" (Arns 1999: 238). Arns's *vertical cut* is therefore an invitation to accept the identities embedded in these layers and to abandon the earlier "binary marking" practices.

Piotrowski's and Arns's disputed fields don't entirely overlap, and their respective concepts of *horizontal* and *vertical* can cause misunderstanding, but in essence both messages are an attempt to connect Europe to collaborative debates that embrace different areas of Europe. This is evident from Lisa Haskel's article (1997), in which she writes almost euphorically about the meaning of Deep Europe (Haskel was a participant *Hybrid WorkSpace* at the *documenta X* event):

> "[Deep Europe is] Not a political position, a utopia or a manifesto, but rather a digging, excavating, tunnelling process toward greater understanding and connection,

> but which fully recognises different starting points and possible directions: a collaborative process with a shared desire for making connection. There may be hold-ups and some frustrations, quite a bit of hard work is required, but we can perhaps be aided by some machinery. The result is a channel for exchange for use by both ourselves and others with common aims and interests."

The destiny of the term Deep Europe is symptomatic. At the end of the 1990s it evolved almost as a fashionable term in mailing lists and at new media festivals, but it also denominated a new midpoint, a common mental space of discussion for both Eastern and Western European artists. The essence of these debates and meetings was the collaboration between East-West and West-East. Physically these conversations took place mostly in Central and Western Europe[1] during new media events, such as *Ostranenie* in Dessau (1997) and *documenta X* in 1997, which brought together participants of the Nettime and Syndicate mailing lists. Those mailing lists were in fact the main 'spaces' in which the debates took place, and their traces were also visible during the so-called *Interstanding* conference from 1997 in Tallinn (the first event called *Interstanding—Understanding Interactivity* took place in 1995 before Nettime and Syndicate were established). If it fair to say that the dominant position on these lists belonged to Western curators, artists and art critics.

First case: the rise and fall of the Syndicate

It is symptomatic that dominance of Western participants became evident in the scandal that ended the Syndicate mailing list. It was related to NATO attacks on Serbia in 1999. Serbia's political position was defended by Andrej Tisma from Novi Sad, who presented himself not so much as a defender of the Milošević regime, but rather as an opponent of American neo-imperialism, interventionism and globalisation. He was opposed by Western pro-NATO artists and curators. At the same time there were divergent opinions concerning the online behaviour of *integer* (also known as Netochka Nezvanova, *antiorp* and by other names), which was a pseudonym also adopted by many artists. One commonly-held opinion was that *integer* should remain on the list because of democratic principles, but others felt harassed, disturbed or that their time was being wasted and to they requested the removal of the 'spammer'. Of course, it would not be fair to describe the *integer* messages simply as spam,

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[1] For instance: in Rotterdam, September 1996; Liverpool, April, 1997; Kassel, July 1997; Dessau, November 1997, Tirana, May 1998, Skopje, October 1998, Budapest, April 1999 and Helsinki, October 1999. See also https://monoskop.org/Syndicate

as they were, rather, textual artworks comprised of programming code and critical remarks. Nonetheless the opposition between parties on the list intensified and there were accusations that East and West attitudes are so divergent that it was as if the West had introduced an "art mafia". The consequence of all this was that a new mailing list, *Spectre*, was created. The list united more than 400 members of the other lists in a calmer, more professional environment. However, without those conflicts something was lost: it seems to me that the professionally and ideologically charged conflict had split opinions in such a way as to make explicit the non-equality and Western-centric bias of all discussions. Andreas Broeckmann and Inke Arns summarised the situation in November 2001 with their polite obituary article: "The Rise and Decline of the Syndicate: the End of an Imagined Community" (Broeckmann, Arns 2001). Their article concluded that the online community was at an end, and expressed that they would rather believe in people than in art.

Second case: the failure of East-West dialogue

The second example is similar, but belongs to an earlier period and is connected to the so-called 'Interpol' scandal that centred on Oleg Kulik and his practice. Kulik's activity in the early 1990s continued to reflect the social environment of Russia, a search for identity and the international art world's interest in Eastern Europe. Kulik became famous for his naked impersonations of a dog. These performances were inspired by his childhood memories and attachment to dogs, but also related to his understanding of how the West sees the East:

> "There is an opinion in the West that everything that is not the West is wild. I faced it repeatedly. Wild Arabs, Wild Russian, Wild blacks, Wild Asians, etc. And I observed the same phenomenon in Asia, in China, for instance... and in Russia, in respect of the neighbouring states. But this is not really important... The dog emerged as a metaphor of the borderline state of the human being positioned between nature and society." (Kulik, 2008: 34):

Kulik's ideas about "zoophrenia",[2] and his dog performances about Russia and being Russian, are a diverse legacy, but his presentation of the 'wild Russian' through the dog is probably the most obvious example of an artist reacting to (Western) stereotypes.

[2] *Zoophrenia*—the programme of Oleg Kulik withhis wife Mila Bredikhina during 1993-1994, following which civilisation should undergo a radical process of degradation that would eventually erase the anthropocentric element. A lot of Kulik's digital collages reflect on this subject, depicting scenes with humans and animals.

Amy Bryzgel (2013: 39-40) writes about Kulik in the context of his search for Russian identity. In comparison to other Soviet nationalities, the self-definition of Russians at the beginning of the 1990s was the most indeterminate. Having been during Soviet times the dominant and repressive nationality, they became objects of repression themselves. Unlike in the other Soviet republics where national identity was distinct from Soviet identity and the two identities were often felt by citizens to be in conflict, the Russian identity overlapped with the Soviet, so that definitions of Russianness became more difficult to distinguish. According to Bryzgel, Kulik's animal performances were a movement towards a pre-linguistic state of development that allowed the artist to experience himself outside the language. Here Bryzgel refers to Jacques Lacan's lectures on psychoanalysis and his idea of a return to the 'Real'—a pre-linguistic existence. Kulik's dog character was thus returning toward a primal and more authentic experience of reality. Understandably, the dog performances were experienced by observers as a provocative critical gesture and provoked debate about art between the West and the Eastern bloc.

While in the past two decades European and Western societies have tended to become economically and culturally closer and more equitable than in the early 1990s, much of Eastern European art remains invisible to the West. For example, the Estonian and Baltic action- and performance-based art of the 1970s and 1980s, which is arguably of profound significance for understanding the art practices of the period, is still under-represented, although it is actively researched by Amy Bryzgel and others.

There have of course been attempts to show what was happening in art behind the Iron Curtain. One example was Petra Stegman's 2008 exhibition *Fluxus East. Networks of Fluxus in Eastern Europe* in Kumu, the Art Museum of Estonia, (Fluxus East, 2008) which included examples of actions from the mid 1960s to the 1980s. Perhaps the best known example is *Roundel of Cremona*, a performance in 1968 by Arvo Pärt, Kuldar Sink, Mart Lille and Toomas Velmet, that included the burning of a violin and was followed by a letter from Pärt and Sink to the Society of Composers of the Estonian SSR. Stegman's Fluxus East exhibition was shown in several major museums of Europe, but there remains no printed catalogue or any proper documentation online including exhibition in Kumu, the Art Museum of Estonia.

The research group at the Slavic seminar of Zurich University has an ongoing project "Performance-Art in Osteuropa (1950–1990): Geschichte und Theorie" that deals mostly with Central European themes and Moscow conceptualism (PerformEast *s.a.*). In their

programme description, George Maciunas and Fluxus are briefly mentioned, but that is the limit of the project's references to the Baltic states.

The so-called 'Interpol' scandal erupted during the 1996 exhibition *Interpol—a global network from Stockholm and Moscow* at the contemporary art and architecture centre Färgfabriken in Stockholm. The curator of Moscow artists was Viktor Misiano. During the opening, Aleksandr Brener and Oleg Kulik demolished part of the Chinese-American artist Wenda Gu's installation, Kulik bit one visitor, and the police were called. Seventeen Swedish organisers wrote an open letter "An Open Letter to the Art World" (1996), in which they described Viktor Misiano's curation of the participant artists "fascist". In an open letter Viktor Misiano replied that these unexpected events were merely the result of previous misunderstandings and poor communication. Interpreting Kulik's performance, Misiano wrote that Kulik's chained dog represented an image of Russia that is rooted in the Western subconscious. The persistence of this issue was still apparent almost ten years later when in 2005 Misiano published a more elaborate text "Interpol. The Apology of Defeat" in the online journal Moscow Art Magazine under section "Case Studies" (Misiano 2005).

Following the destruction of his installation Wenda Gu wrote offering his own interpretation of the events at the Stockholm exhibition. According to Gu, Kulik appeared to have attempted to bite a two-year-old baby and so an audience member kicked Kulick in the face. Gu explains that his installation was demolished by Brener. Gu had collected discarded hair from Swedish and Moscow barbershops and formed it into a tunnel-like installation. In the centre of the tunnel was a disarmed rocket loaned to him from the Royal Swedish Army. Kulik's opinion is expressed in his article "Why Have I Bitten a Man? An Open Letter from Oleg Kulik" (Kulik, 1996), which concluded that it was all about the persistence misunderstandings between East and West. Perhaps a more useful diagnosis is provided by Slovenian art historian Igor Zabel ([1997] 2002: 357) in his article "Dialogue", which describes the continuing battle over the terms of dialogue, about the position of master and servant, and who has the right to say how things should be done. Sadly, the ambivalent and fractious East-West disagreements about what are the appropriate terms and definitions of art continue today.

Third case: Peeter Linnap's *Le Top 50*

The East-West relationship and apparent Western incompetence regarding Estonia is exemplified by the extraordinary, and deliberately ironic, action-exhibition *Le Top 50*, curated by Peeter Linnap in 1994. The exhibition took place in the gallery of the Institute of History, which is located in the Old Town district of Tallinn city centre, and may be considered an exhibition that broke the barriers of local art.

Le Top 50 was based on a list published in the French journal *Beaux Arts*, of the 50 most prominent persons in the international art world. The list included artists, critics, theoreticians, gallerists, like Francis Haskell, Charles Saatchi, Rudi Fuchs, Christian Boltanski, Götz Adriani, Jean-Christophe Ammann, curators and others. They were intellectuals and money-people, as Estonian art critic and writer Heie Treier described them (1994). Linnap sent each person on the list a letter with three questions:

> "Dear […], I guess you could feel disturbed not hearing from me anything before but nevertheless I hope you could help me with just answering the three simple questions:
>
> 1. Have you heard about the country, called **Estonia**, if yes, possibly—what?
>
> 2. Have you heard anything about **art in this country**?
>
> 3. Finally—could you just write or fax a single sentence or a couple with some wish to the artists of Estonia? Can be whatever, but sincere.
>
> Your message will also become a part of the artwork—and will be exhibited as well. I do ask to do exactly the same from all of the 50 Art Prominents of "Le Top 50"."

Portraits of each person on the list were hung on the wall of the Institute. Under each portrait was a green metal post-box where visitors could post letters to the powerful individual in the portrait, and there was a table provided for writing. After Linnap (2021) a few others too the opportunity to write and send letters, including artist Aili Vint and art critic Heie Treier. 13 of the 50 prominent persons replied. In Linnap's opinion:

> "Not one of these prominent art persons, art historians included, knew any facts (artists, artworks, etc.) about Estonian art. Some were nostalgic for pre-1940s Tallinn. My own acquaintance Jean-Christophe Ammann began a letter with the words "Über Litauen weiss ich wenig"."

Estonian critic Reet Varblane (1995: 10) has suggested that the work should be interpreted at three levels: First, regarding the reaction of the Estonian art world; second, regarding the reaction of the powerful artworld individuals depicted in the exhibition; and third, regarding the letters of the audience. The installation touched on many questions about art-power and was the subject of several analyses. In its breadth and boldness the exhibition was unique, focusing as it did on the position of Estonian arts in the context of European culture. Linnap's high self-regard as the author of the installation was explicit in his later reflections on the event: "It came into my mind that to become known I should write to these people… all 50 people, who each know little about Estonian art, will understand something. They will learn that a conman or genius did this work, asked them this question." (Varblane 1995: 11) Linnap was consciously indiscrete. Critic Reet Varblane (1995: 11) wrote: "This act of making acquaintances brings those powerful to an equal position with the Author. However their level of activity and initiative would be much lower: they could be called 'co-authors.'" Linnap's motivation for harassing these "powerful" individuals was clear. In his own words: "The main flaw of the Estonian artist is that he is passive, not talkative, modest—it could be perilous (Varblane 1995: 11). Linnap himself could not be blamed for that.

Estonian critic Johannes Saar (1996: 113) defined Linnap's activity in diagnostic terms: "Showing the invariant structures in society, waking some latent social disease into its acute phase, exposes it and provides society with its diagnosis." Whereas Reet Varblane (1995: 13) referred to Linnap's own definition, which described the exhibition as an "conceptual image-organism"; she also noted Heie Treier's assessment of the work as being a "social research".

From the point of view of method and position the exhibition was distinctive, but I would emphasise another aspect: participation. The mailboxes placed below each portrait were an open invitation to visitors to participate by writing and posting their letters.

Later, in 1997, a similar participatory postage action *Leave a message to the future* was devised by the artist group F.F.F.F. during the annual exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art in Estonia. The group installed mailboxes in the form of barrels on the streets of several Estonian cities into which people could leave messages. The group described the conceptual context of the work in these terms: "Oversaturation of the media environment. Messages are disappearing from the network of analogue means. The situation, where a sign is not carrying information. […] To document our existence in time, we should record information outside our time and space." (F.F.F.F. 1997). It seems there were more

messages posted in the Russian language than in Estonian or any other language, which according to Varblane (1997) tells us something important not only about our present, but also about our future.

Returning to Peeter Linnap, his exhibition *Le Top 50* set a new precedent with its extraordinary questionnaire and attempt to relate its author with the global art world. True, a similar idea was underlying the 1994 exhibition *Borders of Art* curated by Ants Juske, which focused on the status of a creator, expanding it to the writer-critic. But an expansion of the notion of the artwork also took place: the artwork becoming not only an object created with artistic skills, but also an object chosen by the curator thereby ascribing to the chose object the notion of artwork. Linnap's *Le Top 50* was a powerful act of redefinition that functioned to place the Estonian artist and curator into an equal position with influential 'movers-and-shakers' on the international art scene.

As we have seen, among the issues highlighted by Linnap's work is Western incompetence and ignorance about the Eastern European art scene and particularly about Estonia. Of course, during the 1990s there was still relatively little information published about Estonia internationally, and yet it is still surprising to see the extent of profound geographical ignorance, not least the apparent inability to distinguish between Estonia and Lithuania.

As an epilogue to Linnap's exhibition I would like to mention his student Kaisa Eiche's article "//<Hello, World!>" (2021), which was dedicated to Linnap's retrospective exhibition in Pallas Gallery, Tartu and described a similar experiment by Eiche. Eiche aimed to repeat the general form of Linnap's experiment, but chose to explore the process of communication using digital media. She compiled an e-letter and sent it to 50 art institutions in Japan, Australia, and Brasilia. Eiche hoped to get at least ten replies, but for two months nobody answered and so she concluded that developments in communication technology and faster information processing had not brought these worlds any closer. She tried to be charitable, noting that large organisations are often represented at the base level by relatively unsophisticated/less-qualified personnel and that these people often provide the initial filter for incoming communications. Further, it is possible that a cyber security programme had designated the incoming emails as spam. Eiche concluded simply that answering such letter was not a priority for these organisations. Of course, it is also possible that the letters had been perceived as nothing more than an attempt by an artist to satisfy their hunger for notoriety.

Whatever the reasons for ignoring the letters may have been, the experiment still has something to say about how the volume of contemporary information communication may exceed our capacities to deal with it, or more narrowly how we may fail to take interest in the *Close Other* because we are already overwhelmed by the information within our immediate communicative environment.

It may appear that my conclusion about all this must be pessimistic—that Eastern Europe has been almost completely marginalised in the international art world and Western attention has shifted even further away, but my conclusion is actually the opposite. Eastern Europeans have acquired a greater subjectivity than before: we are no longer defined by the outside world but are actively defining ourselves and our place in the world. We have taken our own fate into our hands. It is not enough to be seen in the Western mirror. This means also writing and promoting our own history and arranging definitive events for ourselves. By way of example, Estonian artist Katja Novitskova has played a significant role in the movement of post-internet art; Riga's new media culture centre *RIXC* has continued to organise international events focusing on new technology and has hosted many of the leading figures in the field of digital art and theory. There are many more examples. I would say that the striving for East-West engagement and the power games that has entailed no longer define the relationship between Eastern European art scenes and the rest of the world. Eastern Europe is no longer merely the "Close Other".

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