

Marijan Susovski

**Crossroads in Central European Art
and Art Criticism and Possibilities
for Co-Operation**

*An Indication of Cultural and Political Problems in Central Europe as a
Precondition for Co-Operation*

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This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

Marijan Susovski

Crossroads in Central European Art and Art Criticism and Possibilities for Co-Operation

An Indication of Cultural and Political Problems in Central Europe as a Precondition for Co-Operation

Any approach to co-operation in art and art criticism in Central Europe today must include an assessment of the foundations underlying the social and economic life of Central European countries. This does not only mean the issue of funding and problems of an organizational and conceptual nature, but also the consequences of the political changes that have taken place in some Central European countries in the last five or six years, or are still taking place, and of the grievous effects of earlier conditions. Our discussions must also take into account the activities of the many organizations today concerned with culture in Europe, from UNESCO and the European Council to a whole network of governmental and non-governmental organizations.

The situation in Europe after 1989, and this also means in the art world and cultural co-operation, has been considered at many conferences in recent years which treated issues similar to the ones treated here. The conference held in Edinburgh in 1991 involved the development of a Pan-European cultural identity. The Frontiers Conference held in Kent in 1994 tackled similar problems, as did numerous discussions about Pentagonal, Hexagonal and Alps-Adria co-operation, and co-operation on projects like Cultural Cooperation of Central European and Other European Countries with a Special Accent on Joint Projects held at the end of 1995 in Zagreb. The need to establish North-South and East-West cultural lines of communication which would intersect in Central Europe was a topic of discussion, but although the problems of culture and art in Europe's new

political age are often debated, there have been few serious resulting activities. Central Europe lies at the crossroads of many at currents, but the culture and art of the West and what used to be the East have not yet experienced any meaningful and fruitful meetings.

All these international gatherings were organized to investigate the possibilities of cultural co-operation between the new democracies which until quite recently had different social and value systems, different approaches to modern art, and which needed a radical re-evaluation of their concept of culture, its role and the way it is to function. Before the democratic changes took place, many Central European countries belonging to the Eastern Block had had official art of little artistic value, and art that had some value was considered dissident and was usually banned. This kind of art only gained appreciation in the Western gallery system, when it managed to reach it. Critics who were not upholders of official art could keep abreast of current world events only if they were "self-taught" from study of periodicals, exhibitions and the reviews. In this way, they inevitably left behind critics whose attitude to art was based only on what they learned at state-run art schools. The status of a critic was gained by independent effort, a detailed insight into and study of the areas in which he or she intended to engage, and the formation of personal criteria through practical work writing reviews and texts and travelling to important or international exhibitions, when this was possible.

When the communist states collapsed, their art critics became part of the European cultural community. During the period of change and achievement of independence, a twofold process took place in some countries, a process that was both locally disintegrative and universally integrative as links with the Western European economy and culture developed. This European disintegrating-integrating process should result in the formation of a new cultural community with a new economic, political and cultural identity, which has often been called the Europe of regions and in which the language and the system of art should be the same, differences emerging only from the specific art of the region in which the language is used.

The new states are expected to become a vital component of the new economic, political and cultural environment in Europe centered around Central Europe, the initiators of a new or different European cultural identity. Culture is to be a factor of cohesion shaping European public opinion and s European cultural identity and helping to overcome the

separatism that existed among some nations before the changes took place.

We are interested in whether modern art can really further the development of a Pan-European cultural community in a Europe of regions. A pan-European cultural identity that will be a unity of diverse but equally valuable cultural and art differences. The cooperation of Central European countries should help this development. Is anything happening in this sense?

Many European countries aspire to the creation of a common European area and a common market to be followed by a new form of European political organization. The formation of a common European culture is a natural consequence. A great role in this process is played by the European Community, the Council of Europe, and the appearance of new intentional and inter-regional projects, co-operation, alternative approaches to cultural financing and self-financing (donors and sponsors), and the introduction of new techniques and methods of cultural organization (cultural consulting and management). The massive increase of European and global communications and media network potentially ensures a very important place for the countries of Central Europe as a communications and cultural mediator.

In some parts of Europe, where there was not such a drastic clash of opposing cultural identities as in Central Europe, regional co-operation is on course. Some regions are independently establishing links with other regions and their governments.

The French department of Aquitaine has established an Atlantic Arc together with Portugal and neighbouring Spanish regions. Similarly, the Nord-Pas de Calais, also in France, is linked with Kent in England and the neighbouring region in Belgium. The Baden-Wurttemberg province in Germany is linked with neighbouring areas in France. Scotland is developing links with Scandinavian countries and even with Baltic countries. Scandinavian countries already have their own "block," the logical consequence of geographical and economic conditions.

Regions are becoming increasingly independent, and this makes direct economic links possible without the mediation of central government institutions. United Europe will thus not be a community of the existing large (national) states, but of its independent regions. As a consequence, the future of Europe does not lie in links between traditional European metropolises, but in links between smaller towns that are regional centres. The power of regions in comparison with that of large cities can be seen in the Alps-Adria region, which has almost the same number of inhabitants

as all the large cities of Northern Europe (about 70 million), but a larger income per capita (11.43 thousand ECUs in comparison with 11.3 thousand ECUs, according to 1991 Eurostat and OECD reports). If the economy of the Alps-Adria countries, which belong to Central Europe, is so strong, this means, on the one hand, that a lot of capital could potentially be poured into cultural co-operation, but, on the other hand, it also means that many other Central European countries, which used to belong to the Eastern Block, are at present no match for that capital.

Thus, most Central European cultural activities take place within the Alps-Adria community, among the rich Mediterranean countries in the south of Central Europe, activities such as the Biennial of Young Artists of the European Mediterranean that takes place in a different Mediterranean town each time, or the Rijeka Biennial of Young Artists of the European Mediterranean, but projects linked with the eastern countries of that region, like the attempt to link Danubian countries at exhibitions of the Danube Project or the project Naturally Nature and Art in Central Europe, organized by Múcsarnok in Budapest, have not only encountered financial difficulties but others, too, at one moment even political problems.

In general, while inter-regional projects in other parts of Europe are easier to organize, in Central Europe they meet with great obstacles. What is the problem? When cultural life under the influence of ideology and directed from above disappeared, in some countries a void developed in the definition of the social position and importance of culture, and of the system of support for cultural activities.

A democratic system demands a different attitude to culture and art. The state and its culture are based on new economic principles. Unfortunately, all this is a slow process and often the interest of the new governments is not focused on culture and art. Bilateral and multilateral co-operation with Central European and other countries is becoming increasingly important, but even a basic awareness of the cultural scene and the cultural potential of institutions and activities in other countries is still sadly lacking.

When representatives of conservative parties get into power, they often impose their own concept of art. In such cases, modern culture (which also means modern art) is usually not in the foreground for politicians. They are not capable of adapting to the present age but for pragmatic political reasons concerned with national identity, they try to build culture on images and symbols from their country's past. The sudden transformation of the cultural infrastructure has often led to excessive rationalization and to a

decrease rather than an increase of cultural life. Many import cultural institutions are on the verge of extinction, while many others have been left without support and are thus slowly dying.

Concerning crossroads in Central European art and art criticism, I would like to ask whether real criticism, in an ethical and moral sense, actually exists today. Yet the art critic, especially in influential newspapers, can be of vital importance as far as the formation of public opinion and funding are concerned, and he or she also plays a crucial role in the formation of the future of art and culture in individual countries, in linking the best results with those of other countries. The responsibility of the art critic in the new-born democratic countries is rather heavy. Art critics who for personal pragmatic reasons act in compliance with the demands placed on them by politicians who have no interest in modern art are to blame for the present situation in the field of art. The problem of art critics and their morality is linked with the problem of public taste. In some newly established states, the newly rich class, with no art education and with no taste, become art patrons but often follow the advice of critics who are adverse to modern art. Insistence on an alternative approach to financing culture, or to self-financing, results from the myth that a so-called "market culture can be established, although this is not possible in the way now being followed even in the most highly developed countries of Western Europe. Enforced commercialization of bad art has resulted in the decline and closing of many good galleries and museums.

This opens up the problem of art criticism in the mass media, and of the subjects, types and quality of exhibitions their art critics write about or must write about. Since the information system is not legally regulated, art programmes in the media serve for information manipulation. It is thus not surprising that artists and engaged individuals have again begun to establish alternative exhibition areas, periodicals and even radio and television programmes. These programmes are realized through various foundations for promoting and funding current art projects, especially by Soros Centres, the Soros Centres for Contemporary Art, or by seeking financial support through culture and information centres of Western European countries, like the British Council, the French Institute; the Goethe Institute and others. Of course, official state bodies for culture in the newly established states are often suspicious of this alternative field and in an open or veiled manner consider it undesirable.

This disorganized state of affairs makes it impossible for art critics, theoreticians and curators to do their work properly and effectively in the

newly established countries. They still depend on great international art events of the West, the critics and commercial galleries that work for them, and can do little to promote the art of their country, which they aspire to do. Central European art critics who used to belong to the communist system are still not respected in the West. The Western gallery system makes use of this situation, organizing exhibitions of art from former East European countries on which critics from those countries have no particular influence. As before, artists have to wait to be chosen and recognized by someone important from the West. The poor economic foundation in many East-Central European countries makes it impossible to get enough money from ministers of culture or from sponsors for events that would break off this kind of relationship in the future. On one side we have declarations about co-operation, on the other practical side the result is unsatisfactory. We are witnesses of the change of ruling parties and ministers of culture in new democratic states, and of the decisions they make. Directors of important museums are discharged without any reason given. The most recent case happened in Poland, where the Polish AICA-section reported at the Executive Board of the International AICA in Paris on 24 February that Jaromir Jedlinski, the prominent director of the Museum Sztuki in Lodz, had been discharged without any explanation. The Polish AICA-section requested the intervention of the International Art Critics Association to prevent this.

This conference is entitled Crossroads in Central European (Art and Art Criticism, ideas, Themes, and Problems). As I hope my paper shows, my views on the Crossroads-problem are rather grim. My paper is not an academic discourse on art theory and art criticism in this area today but is more concerned with the political and economic aspects of co-operation. As I have tried to show, cooperation depends on conditions in the new democracies in Central Europe which are not yet completely systematized and organized, so that many difficulties stand in the way of satisfactory co-operation.¹ I have indicated general problems without wishing to draw a parallel between the new democratic states or compare them because great differences exist in their attitude to culture. If my paper has any echo at all, then each of them will understand where it stands on the road to cultural co-operation in Central Europe and what kind of problems it must solve to meet other countries in joint projects.

Finally, I would like to say that if the will to co-operate exists, a way can be found even when there is not enough money. I have already mentioned the meeting held in Zagreb in mid-September, 1995, by the ministers of culture of countries taking part in the international project Donauballet, which

began in Zagreb. This project was judged an ideal form of international cultural cooperation that could be used in other fields of art. It was based on the idea that many countries should join in financing co-operation, and it was emphasized that the specific art values of individual countries should not be submerged but that they should come to full expression. It is especially easy to achieve in the fine arts where a single exhibition can be the sum of individual contributions by artists from the many countries co-financing the project.

Still in relation to this problem, I would like to recall the five international New Tendencies exhibitions held in Zagreb in the sixties (from 1961 to 1973). About 200 artists who were at that time engaged in constructivist, kinetic, computer and conceptual art took part, the whole project resulting in a major collection of constructivist art that is in the Modern Art Museum in Zagreb (at that time the Zagreb Town Galleries), and on the basis of which the exhibition Constructivism and Kinetic Art from the Holdings of the Modern Art Museum was held last year. Many artists who are very well-known today contributed to these exhibitions, from Soto, Ono Piene and Mavinger, Vasarely, to Croatian artists like Knifer, Picelj, Richter, Srnec, Kristl, Šutej, Dobrović, and others. This is how individual museums can organize exhibitions in their field of interest and acquire works of art for their holdings. The Modern Art Museum is preparing a continuation of the New Tendencies entitled New New Tendencies, which will be preceded by a symposium entitled The Edge to be held in November, 1996, at which a final form for this future regular biennial exhibition in Zagreb will be proposed. The name The Edge covers discussion of end-of-century problems, the end of various artistic ideologies, limitations in the use of various media and, finally, the end of the present century. As in the earlier New Tendencies, the purpose of this event is to engage as many European artists as possible in subjects common to all at the end of the 20th century. We hope that it will link various countries and problems that are today passing through the crossroads of Europe, and that it will make artists from East-Central Europe better known, artists whom we can otherwise meet only at great world biennial exhibitions like those in Sao Paulo and Sydney, and possibly Kassel.