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## East Art Map

An (artists) review of the contemporary production of art in Eastern Europe.

In the 1990s the Slovene artists group IRWIN was actively involved in the transformation of the previously socialist art scene. This network was founded in 1993 by Borut Vogelnik along with five other artists. Through their work they wished to establish social and historical references that could construct a common history. The book "East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe" is the product of a comprehensive survey of the last 50 years of art production and attempts to reconstruct, from an Eastern European viewpoint, the missing histories of contemporary art in these countries. Borut Vogelnik and Miran Mohar spoke to REPORT about the development of this book that will be launched in Bratislava on 13 May.

What make artists publish a book such as this?

Borut Vogelnik: In Eastern Europe (also known as the former communist countries of Europe, Eastern and Central Europe, the New Europe, etc.), there are, as a rule, no transparent structures organising the kind of referential system for the art-historically significant events, artefacts and artists that would be accepted and respected outside the borders of a given country. What we encounter instead are systems closed within national borders, most often based on a rationale adapted to local needs. At times there are even double systems in which we find, alongside 'official' art histories, a whole series of stories and legends about the art and artists who were opposed to the official art establishment. But written records of the latter are few and fragmented. In addition, comparisons with the art and artists operating in the West at the same time are extremely rare.

This kind of fragmented system poses several problems. First of all, it prevents any serious comprehension of the art as a whole that was created during socialist times. Second, it represents a huge impediment for artists, who, deprived of any solid support for their activities, are compelled to steer between the local and international art systems. And third, it presents a major block to communication among artists, critics and theoreticians from these countries.

EAM is primarily our response to the concrete problems we are faced with as artists from the East exhibiting as well in the West. It is impossible to establish communication without first articulating your own position. Beside this I must admit that we are thrilled by the fact that in the East it is still possible to intervene in the field of articulation as a "private individual" on levels that are elsewhere in the exclusive domain of institutions; and because such interventions are, thanks to already familiar models, so much like painting from nature that we were prepared to see them, in their uniqueness and beauty, as artefacts.

Your book "East Art Map" is named after your project of 2002 – does it come out of this idea of visualisation (or making it visible) or is it kind of integration in your work?

**Miran Mohar:** To explain the role of the EAM book within the project I have to say a bit more about the structure and phases of the East Art Map project itself:

The EAM project in fact started in 1999 and consists of several phases:

Irwin, in collaboration with New Moment (Ljubljana), invited a group of art critics, curators and artists from different ex-socialist countries in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe to select and present up to ten crucial art projects from their countries and contexts created over the past 50 years. In this way, basic data on approximately 220 artefacts and projects was collected and presented on a CD-ROM (2002) and in a special issue of the New Moment magazine in the same year.

The next step was to put the EAM selection onto the Internet and open it up for contributions by its users to propose the missing artefacts, events and projects. The general public and specialists were invited to provide additional data. The international EAM committee chose additional works from these proposals.

The EAM book derives from these two processes, including all the reproduction of the artefacts selected in this way, as well as additional texts on each artefact and artist. The second part of the book consists of 17 comparative essays. From the very beginning it was meant to be an integral part of the EAM project.

An important part of the project was also a symposium called Mind the Map, in which young researchers from Eastern and Western Europe discussed the topics of the East Art Map. The symposium, which took place in Leipzig in 2005, was prepared by Marina Gržini, Veronika Darian and Günther Heeg.

On the initiative of Michael Fehr, the East Art Museum exhibition of works created between 1950 and 1980 and selected from the East Art Map data base took place in Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum in Hagen 2005.

**What effects do you expect this publication to have?**

**Miran Mohar:** Apart from reproductions of the selected works and texts about these artefacts the book also comprises essays by various theoreticians, curators and art historians from Eastern and Western Europe and the USA that address the topics of East European art from different perspectives. We were particularly glad about the texts that compare various aspects of contemporary art in Eastern Europe with the Western art scene, thus placing the EAM project in the international context. The text by Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, for example, deals with how the method of overidentification, which developed primarily in the East European space, affected the new media art of the 1990s in the West. I hope the book will be a useful orientation in an area where even East Europeans have difficulty finding their way around and that it will trigger a reaction and, in response, encourage debate and generate different and parallel stories, which would be very welcome as the EAM project was designed to open up communication in this field. I also hope the book will reach a wide readership thanks to renowned publishers and distributors, such as MIT Press, who have been pioneers in covering contemporary East European art with their publications for the last couple of years.

**Did you also find some new aspects of art from Eastern Europe while producing the book?**

**Miran Mohar:** About two fifths of the works proposed by the selectors within the framework of the EAM project are totally new to me and, as I know from our talks, new to my colleagues as well. And if this is so for us, who have nevertheless been moving in this

space to a certain extent, you can imagine how this is for others. There are quite a number of works which show that on the other side of the Iron Curtain an artistic practice was developing in which the conceptual line was particularly strong and significant. It can be seen that some artists were developing original concepts surprisingly early. To mention only few of them: The sketch of a proto-land art project Slicing Off Sljeme by Ivan Kožari from 1960 is quite surprising.

East Art Museum exhibition in Hagen, this work was displayed together with Iron Curtain by Christo & Jeanne Claude from 1962 (which was selected by Iara Bubnova from Bulgaria). Then there's Mikhail Chernyshev, a Russian artist, who stretched bought geometric plastic tablecloths and wallpapers over wood subframes in 1962 and exhibited them as paintings. Or Ion Grigorescu from Romania, who expressed himself in lonely performances delivered for the film camera only. Of course, in-depth research and comparative studies are necessary to place these artistic practices in the global context, which is exactly what we would wish. But this exceeds the framework of the EAM project and our capabilities.

**About the book:**

**East Art Map**

**Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe**

**Edited by IRWIN**

The artistic map of Europe contains different degrees of detail and resolution. Italy, France, and Spain are presented in fine grain, but the Balkan peninsula is little more than a vague outline. England, Germany, and Scandinavia have many features filled in, but to the east of Germany things are blurred. Until recently, cities like Sofia, Odessa, Skopje, and Belgrade had next to no definition. Further to the East, Moscow comes into focus, but this is no compensation for the Baltics, sentenced for the last half-century to blank space.

In the West, virtually every move of the artist, the art market, and the art public is documented. But in Eastern Europe, no such system of documentation or communication exists. Instead, we encounter systems that are not only inaccessible to the West, but incongruous from one country to the next. Beside the official art histories there is often a whole series of stories and legends about "unofficial," unapproved art and artists. East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe is an ambitious attempt to reconstruct the missing histories of contemporary art in Eastern Europe from an East European and artistic perspective. It is perhaps the widest ranging art documentation project ever undertaken by the East on the East, involving a large network of artists, scholars, curators and critics coordinated by the IRWIN group over several years.

The editors invited eminent art critics, curators, and artists to present up to ten crucial art projects produced in their respective countries over the past 50 years. The choice of the particular artworks (many of them reproduced in color), artists, and events, as well as their presentation, was left exclusively to the individual selectors. In addition, the editors asked experts from both East and West to provide longer texts offering cross-cultural perspectives on the art of both regions.

**IRWIN is the name of a group of five artists who make up the visual-arts component of the Slovenian art collective NSK, based in Ljubljana.**