

# **Review: *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology.***

By Ana Janevski and Roxana Marcoci (eds.). The Museum of Modern Art, 2018. ISBN: 9781633450646. 408 pp.

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What major changes have occurred in Eastern European art over the course of the last thirty years? *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe* is a critical anthology that attempts to answer this ambitious question by taking the events of the years 1989-1991 as its departure point. It is important to first ask: what do we speak of when we speak of Eastern European art? Are we referring to artistic production within a specific geographical region? Or rather art addressing a shared communist experience? Eastern Europe itself is subject to many definitions. Many of these would place countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary in Central Europe. However, this insistence, in turn, implies that the 'East' remains inferior to the West and hence reinforces the existing stigma. It is only through consistent use that the term 'Eastern Europe' can be reclaimed and destigmatized. It will hence be used throughout this review. By probing such key questions, *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe* dispels the Western narrative of Eastern Europe as a homogenous entity and emphasizes the complexities and contradictions present in the region and its history of art.

Published in 2018, it is the ninth volume in the 'Primary Documents' series of critical anthologies compiled by the curators at the Museum of Modern Art. It is the second time the series has chosen to tackle the subject of Eastern Europe. Its first publication, *A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s* (Hoptman and Pospiszył 2002), covered an earlier period that ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The two volumes are hence best read alongside each other, providing an overview of all developments of the last sixty years. But why does the MoMA return to the topic of Eastern Europe sixteen years after its first book about it? With nationalist sentiments and xenophobic tendencies on the rise in the region, it is more necessary than ever to probe the aftermath of Eastern Europe's communist past and the shockwaves still resonating from its transition to a democratic – and capitalist – system.

The volume encompasses seventy-five texts and includes essays, interviews, proposals, and statements. This collection of diverse material is in itself no small achievement, particularly in an area where research has often been hindered by the unavailability of sources. As emphasized in an earlier

publication, *East Art Map*, Eastern Europe lacks the ‘transparent structures organizing the kind of referential system for the art-historically significant events, artifacts, and artists that would be accepted and respected outside the borders of a given country’ (IRWIN 2006, 11). Though much has since been done to amend this, many vital texts remain untranslated, unpublished, or otherwise inaccessible abroad. *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe* compiles sources that originally appeared in over a dozen languages, which in itself is a significant contribution to the field.

The texts themselves are divided over seven chapters, each addressing a specific theme. These include broader questions of how artists have tackled their shared communist heritage, the fraught nature of Eastern European democracy, as well as the space its art occupies in a globalized world.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, other chapters deal with narrower topics. These include looking at how artists engage with questions of gender, as well as the role archives play in their practice. Newly commissioned texts act as an introduction to each of the seven chapters. Due attention is devoted to several regions within Eastern Europe, such as the Balkans and, most notably, the previously neglected area of the Baltic states. But one of the volume’s recurring contradictions emerges when looking at the vocabulary used across the texts. While some refer to a communist past, others, most notably the introduction to the volume by Janevski and Marcoci, speak of socialism. This serves to demonstrate an ongoing discrepancy in how we speak about Eastern Europe. As noted by Bojana Pejić, those living on the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain ‘hardly ever called our state “communist”: we always nicknamed it “socialist”’ (Pejić 2004, 249). And while perhaps unavoidable due to the anthological nature of the work, it is a missed opportunity on the part of the editors to choose to forego a discussion of the linguistic problems in the field.

It is important to mention one section of the volume in particular. The second chapter addresses the history of exhibitions of Eastern European art, an area that has been greatly under-researched in the past decades. The only book addressing the topic has been *Curating ‘Eastern Europe’ and Beyond: Art Histories through the Exhibition* published in 2013 (Orišková 2013). The chapter takes into account exhibitions of Eastern art in the West, and Claire Bishop’s excellent introduction argues for distinct phases in Western exhibitions: from a ‘rediscovery’ of the East following the fall of the Berlin Wall, to nostalgic presentations of Austria-Hungary and responses to the Balkan wars of the 1990s, and finally more recent engagement with cultures beyond the borders of the European Union. But the chapter also describes Eastern initiatives at its own exhibitions, examining its process of self-historicization. For example, Octavian Eșanu’s essay asks how the transition to democracy affected the Eastern European

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to emphasize that “shared communist heritage” refers to characteristics shared by communist countries (such as a single-party state or the practice of censorship) but does not aim to imply that communism manifested itself in the same way across all of Eastern Europe. An example of this would be Tito’s Yugoslavia (which broke away from Stalin as early as 1948) and Ceaușescu’s Romania (which insisted on preserving a degree of independence from the USSR while nevertheless pursuing oppressive policies of its own).

art world and focuses on the network of Soros Centers for Contemporary Art that sprang up across the region after 1989.

*Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe* is an invaluable source for anyone with an interest not only in contemporary Eastern European art but also those concerned with post-communist analysis or the rethinking of the Western-centric cultural canon. At the same time, it also leaves us with questions for the future, not only with regards to the region but also Europe as a whole. And, in an age of rising nationalism, it urges us to ask what role art can, and should, play today.

## REFERENCES

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