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## **Dissident Education: Socially Engaged Art from the Former East in a Global Context**

Eastern European conceptual art at the end of the twentieth century poses questions regarding the social role of the artist that distinguish its goals and methods from those of Western conceptual art. My thesis evaluates the effectiveness of politicized avant-garde praxis in an integrated Europe, a process which had been cast into doubt by the triumphalist rhetoric supporting the shift from state controlled to capitalist economies in the East. I focus on three artists' groups, (IRWIN with Marina Gržinic from Slovenia, Chto Delat? from Russia, and Lia Perjovschi and Dan Perjovschi from Romania) who worked as conceptual artists to create new practices around suppressed topics during periods of political duress. The issues their art raised included gender discrimination, the false construction of national and ethnic identities, the corrupt nature of political power, and the ethics of working under socialism, and capitalism. I show how these artists realized their concerns in the social sphere in an era when they were repressed or crudely denounced by conservative officials (1980-2014). By grounding my analysis in comparative studies of groups in three different regional political contexts, my study reveals the dynamics of exchange that fueled the reconfiguration of cultural identities at the end of the Cold War. My strategy addresses the broader question of why, and how artists who came to maturity under repressive political regimes continue to question the transition from socialism to capitalism.

My dissertation reveals and examines relationships between artists working in countries that share the legacy of socialism, yet experienced different historical consequences of its transformation as regimes changed. The revolutions that swept across Eastern Europe in 1989 led to the break-up of former Yugoslavia in 1990, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The case-study method I adopt highlights the similarities and differences between artists' strategies and audience reception alike, and enables me to interpret specific artistic projects without resorting to descriptive art historical chronologies. I draw on the examples provided by anthropologist Alexey Yurchak in his landmark study *Everything Was Forever*,

*Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*<sup>1</sup>, and art historians Susan E. Reid and David Crowley in their seminal books *Style and Socialism*<sup>2</sup> and *Socialist Spaces: Sites Of Everyday Life In The Eastern Bloc*<sup>3</sup>. These scholars emphasize the situated nature of social actions, perceptions and systems of representation without reducing them to meta-narratives of national identity or simple rejections of ideological paradigms. I also adapt political opportunity theories by political scientist Sidney Tarrow in his major books *Power in Movement*<sup>4</sup> and *Contentious Politics*<sup>5</sup> to emphasize the interlocking cultural, organizational and personal sources of social movements' power, during moments of political system-change. These frameworks shed light on the self-organizing strategies of the artists, who had to constantly contend with official institutional exclusion and censorship during the 1980s and 1990s. Whereas the existing scholarship presents some of this art as a regional, stylistic offshoot of conceptual art, I propose that these artists were not only locally politically motivated, but that they also succeeded in redefining radical political practices in the visual arts among participants in the larger, globalized art community. In a sequence of three chapters, I critically frame conceptual art projects that evolved over three decades beginning with the artists' early involvements in dissident circles in the 1980s. The works discussed are regarded as contributing to the historical construction of contemporary conceptual art today because they activated major social themes relevant to both local and international audiences. In the first chapter, I trace the origins of IRWIN and Gržinic's pioneering creation of a widely accessible artistic research tool and archive, through their long-term project "East Art Map" (2006-present). In their complex installations and comprehensive publications, these artists presented a multiplicity of voices and aesthetic visions within distinct generations to constitute a regional art history that significantly differed from Western-centric narratives of the post-Second World War period. Responding to these artists and the needs of their own immediate environment, the Perjovschis developed strategies for critical inquiries into the recent past, which they crystallized in two major artistic endeavors: "The Contemporary Art Archive/ Center for Art Analysis" and "The Knowledge Museum" (1985-2010). In Chapter 2 I trace the impact of these projects on contemporary society, culture, and politics. Extending this narrative to the present, Chapter 3 argues that the group Chto Delat?'s didactical art installation "Activist Club" (2009) exposed historical social struggles in Europe that

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<sup>1</sup> Alexey Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Susan E. Reid and David Crowley, *Style And Socialism*, Oxford, U.K.: Berg Publishers, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Susan E. Reid and David Crowley, *Socialist Spaces: Sites Of Everyday Life In The Eastern Bloc*, Oxford, U.K.: Berg Publishers, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Sydney Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Sydney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Contentious Politics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

elucidate their legacy for present-day social movements. I show how their related educational project, the “School of Engaged Art” (2013) has become a vital platform that proposes a collaboration-based system of artistic practice and theory in Russia. Crucially, it now provides a powerful alternative to the authoritarian cultural policy of Vladimir Putin’s current regime. I interpret these activities as a specific type of politicized conceptual practice defined by the artists’ shared focus on the process of education--of gaining and sharing knowledge within regional communities. Although artistic analysis and knowledge production are strategies that have characterized some historical 20th-century avant-garde art as radical, the projects examined here directly involve audiences from different backgrounds and thus have had a more pronounced socio-political impact. I demonstrate how the artists have constructed educational platforms for emancipatory knowledge and triggered a formative interaction with audiences over the course of three decades. Unlike North American conceptual artists, who mounted a critique of the commodification of art system, yet were still able to exhibit their work in museums, the artists in my dissertation confronted both a lack of an art infrastructure and institutional exclusion. At the same time, they negotiated a critical stance with respect to the globalization of art institutions, a process that links international capital investment and regional state power. The artists’ critical orientation to both western liberal and repressive local government policies makes the didactic, educational thrust of their projects especially effective.

My research relies on primary and secondary sources that include museum archives, artists’ archives, my own interviews with the artists in their native languages, and participation in their artistic events *in situ*. I have researched in the Norton Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Photography from St. Petersburg at the Zimmerli Art Museum in New Brunswick, the Museum of Contemporary Art archives and IRWIN’S archive in Ljubljana, the “Arta” Magazine Archives in Bucharest and the Perjovschis’ archive in Sibiu, Dmitry Vilensky’s archive in Berlin and the Ludwig Collection of Nonconformist Art at the Marble Palace Hermitage in St. Petersburg. Additionally, I have compiled research on the social groups who have been the audience or users of the artists’ long-term educational projects, and their interactions. Many of my observations are based on actual encounters with audiences in the artists’ workshops, seminars, courses, conferences and other artistic activities over the course of four years in their respective locales. Owing in large part to my multi-pronged approach to research, my dissertation may serve as a model for global art history. It positions key art projects not as objects of socialist and post-socialist histories within a predetermined

Western canon, but as active inquiries into vital historical processes of the 20th and 21st centuries, and their political consequences.