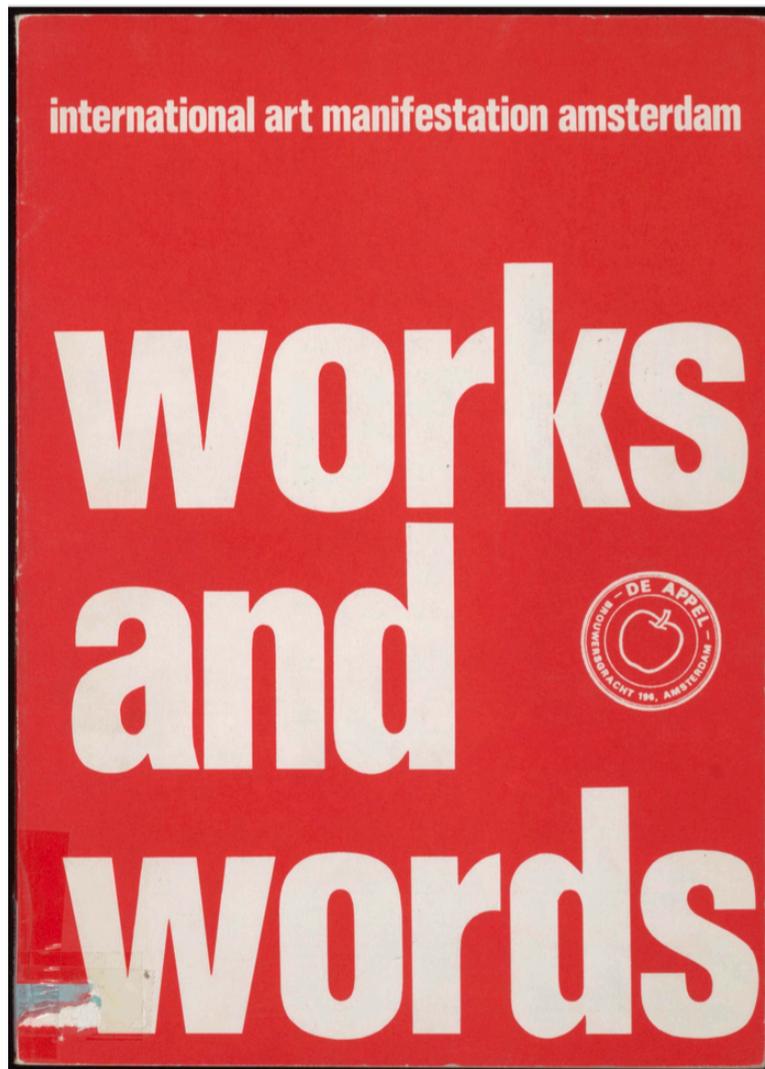


**The ‘Eastern European’ Grey Zone:  
‘Works and Words’, Amsterdam 1979.**



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**Abstract:**

This thesis aims at questioning the art historical disparity between the so-called East-Central European region and West Europe through the case of the international art manifestation ‘Works and Words’ in Amsterdam originally held in 1979 and again in a 40 year commemorative archival show in 2018. First the historic and sociopolitical context of this regional and historical disparity will be analyzed. More on, the implications of the historic and sociopolitical context will be reflected onto the art scene which will then help explain the current state of affairs. Knowing that the exchange of information was allegedly restricted during the Cold War era between East and West Europe, the developments in art, largely using the case of Works and Words (1979 and 2018), will be compared and discussed in order to achieve a common ground and understanding of what was happening in both regions. What may have been considered a political rift during the Cold War, could have affected the way in which art from Eastern Europe is perceived.

It has come to my attention that even though, on a formal level, the art created in both regions shares many similarities, art from one region (East) is perceived completely differently from that of the other (West). On a conceptual level it is clearer why this would be the case, however the methodology used to analyze and understand the art has not opened this possibility up. This unravels many questions, however one that stands out, is whether the Western methods and aesthetic traditions, set in place to analyze these complex systems of art in a globalized world, are indeed sufficiently complex to actually grasp the context and culture of these works. In the case of the East-Central European region, in order to try to get closer to the epicenter of this art historical disparity, one has to contextualize the issue from different interrelated angles; socio-historically, art historically and aesthetically. Looking at the East Central European region through the Works and Words manifestation and in the specific context in which it will be analyzed, may open up a clearer way in which one can see how and possibly why this region has acquired such a status in the globalized art historical map. Through examining the case of Works and Words, one could potentially relate the eventual questions and approach to other regions of the world as well.

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. International Art Manifestation ‘Works and Words’, Amsterdam 1979.</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1 Works and Words International Art Manifestation, Amsterdam. 1979.	8
1.2 The Research Trips.	9
1.3 The Dilemma /Title.	14
1.4 Outcome and Critique.	21
1.5 Footnotes #3 Works and Words	26
1.6 Conclusion.	29
<b>2. The ‘Nylon Curtain’ and East-Central European Identity.</b>	<b>31</b>
2.1 Eastern European Identity Politics	35
2.2 Conclusion	39
<b>3. Is Art History in East-Central Europe Possible? Defining the Artistic Grey Zone and Conceptual art.</b>	<b>40</b>
3.1 The Art Historical Grey Zone	42
3.2 Is there an East-Central European Art History?	48
3.3 Conceptual Art in East (Central) Europe: A Camouflage Method.	51
3.4 Conclusion	57
<b>4. Aesthetics and Identity Politics.</b>	<b>58</b>
4.1 Art History and Aesthetics.	59
4.2 Aesthetics and Identity Politics.	62
4.3 Case Study: Works and Words.	64
4.4 Conclusion:	79
<b>5. Global Art History, The Grey Zone and the Relevance of ‘Works and Words’</b>	<b>81</b>
5.1 Relevance of ‘Works and Words’	85
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>99</b>

# Introduction

The title of this thesis suggests the cultural and socio-political phenomenon that has taken place between Western Europe and the East-Central European region (which for the purpose of this thesis will only include Hungary, Poland, former Yugoslavia, and former Czechoslovakia). Even after the dismantlement of the physical separation between East and West Europe, the Berlin Wall, the consequences of its implementation are, to a certain degree, still felt today. This has of course left the art historical narrative of this region at a liminal state where it doesn't exactly *fit* into the conventional art historical narrative nor does it have a singular shared history or art history of its own. Hence the term I will be using to describe this region is *The Grey Zone*.

*The Grey Zone*, is used to signify the liminal geographic but also theoretical position of East Central Europe within both the political but also the art historical position of this region and signifies the term proposed by Piotr Piotrowski, namely ‘close Others’. This term relates to the postcolonial notion of Otherness and orientalism as discussed by Saïd and relates to how “the positioning of the non-Western, or non-European, differs from that of Central or Eastern Europe. The non-European “Other” is a real “Other”, while the Central or Eastern European Other is a “not-quite-Other” or a “close Other”<sup>1</sup>. This position of East Central Europe is also shared on the political sphere as dictated by Merje Kuus who claims that on a political level, even though most of the East Central European countries are now part of the European family, there is still a clear distinction between West Europe and the East (Central) Europe – making East Central Europe ‘not-quite-European’ yet.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the term *Grey Zone*, in relation to the position of East Central Europe, is meant to refer to its undetermined and uncertain position, geographically, historically, art historically and politically.

In artistic terms, what this meant was that due to the political situation in Eastern Europe artistic production was surveilled, as it was also highly political and censored by governmental authorities. Even though Eastern European art, in general, may have entered the post war period in a way that resembled the Western canonical art historical narrative, by 1989 and the fall of

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<sup>1</sup> Piotr Piotrowski. *Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde*. In *Europa! Europa?*. (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2009), 49-58.

<sup>2</sup> Merje Kuus. "Europe's eastern expansion and the reinscription of otherness in East-Central Europe." *Progress in Human Geography* 28, no. 4 (2004): 473.

the Berlin Wall it had officially entered the realm of ‘otherness’.<sup>3</sup> Largely due to the clashing political ideologies and the governments’ suppression of the freedom of expression, education and so on, the cultural realm developed differently on the Eastern side of the wall. Today, its geographic but also theoretical position between Europe and Russia, have left it in a liminal position because its art history does not align with either the European one or the Russian one nor as a region in itself. This means that an encompassing ‘art history of East Central Europe after 1945’ does not exist because the art historical but also historical narratives of each state (in this case Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia) due to complex and different reasons makes it increasingly complicated for this region to be considered as a unit.

In light of the upcoming 40-year anniversary of the 1979, *Works and Words* International Art Manifestation of De Appel (Centre for Contemporary Art) in Amsterdam, it is clear that the position of Eastern European art is not a recent problem but has been one that has progressed over the years. In summarizing the effort of the De Appel in 1979, it was “a manifestation which focused on the dialectical interaction of reflection and action”<sup>4</sup> between the Eastern European countries involved: *The Grey Zone* (Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Poland) and The Netherlands. Marga van Mechelen stated that: “[s]imilarly, organizers of exhibitions and events in the West were reproached for disregarding the work of (individual) artists from the East. Artists complained that whenever attention was devoted to them and their work it was always couched in terms of nationality or groupings, and never as individuals worthy of the same attention enjoyed somehow automatically or by default by Western artists. That perceived tendency would leave its mark on *Works and Words*, with both organizers and participants ultimately failing to dispel all such criticism and distrust.”<sup>5</sup> In hindsight, now that one has become conscious of the limitations of the 1970s multiculturalism policies that were set in motion in institutions as a response to our ever-globalizing societies, the way in which De Appel handled the exhibition 40 years later will be discussed.

The art in question in this thesis is that of the underground scene, as that was the art that was being produced away from the government radar and therefore remained uncensored. One major difference between these two art scenes is that one sees a change in artistic

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<sup>3</sup> Hoptman, Laura J., and Tomáš Pospiszyl, eds. *Primary Documents: a sourcebook for eastern and central european art since the 1950s*. (The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 9-11.

<sup>4</sup> Marga van Mechelen: *Works and Words* (1979) in the shadow of *I AM* (1978). In: Christian Höller (ed.). *L’Internationale Post-War Avant-Gardes Between 1957 and 1986*. (JRP/Ringier Zürich, 2012), 278-285.

<sup>5</sup> Marga van Mechelen, 288.

expression, where the underground art adapted from traditional figurative/ abstract painting to other media such as installation, photography, performance and video and mail art. A reason for this development could have been that the government authorities did not know how to censor this sort of expression, they could not understand or approach it. Mail art – or the Fluxus movement – played a big role in international communication between artists in this region. A parallel thread of such expression had also premiered in the West. This all falls under the umbrella term *conceptual art*, but it was manifested differently.

Often in literature, it is suggested that the ‘Eastern bloc’ was to blame for the ideological and political rift during the Cold War. It is important to emphasize that the situation between West and East was just two sides of the same coin. To claim that art created in the West was a-political is inaccurate. When looking at the development of art in both regions at this time, it makes sense to label the art as *conceptual*, but what conceptual meant to Eastern Europeans differed to what it meant to Western Europeans/ Americans. In the interview series: Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe, by e-Flux, Boris Groys stated that: “I remember this very well, in regard to people coming from the West in the 1960s. We felt ourselves very close to them aesthetically but not always politically.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the Czechoslovak theoretician Jaroslav Andel stated that “the pieces from socialist countries that look similar to the Western ones may have different meanings in their original contexts” and questioned the possibility of whether these different meanings of a similar expression could be further understood through the same conceptual framework.<sup>7</sup>

As Piotrowski explains, this could be the result of a vertical, western-centrism approach to art history, where the Western standard becomes universal. For the case of East Central Europe, “although they were dominated by the Soviet union, they remained European [...] writing from the “vertical” perspective, art historians were for a long time unable to reveal the meanings of the artistic culture in East-Central Europe, which developed in different ways in specific countries, for instance, although geographically East Berlin was located just steps away from the West.”<sup>8</sup> The opinions expressed by Groys and Andel have been reflected in Piotrowski’s writings, where he describes how different notions and concepts had different

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<sup>6</sup> Zdenka Badovinac, "Conceptual Art And Eastern Europe: Part I". *E- Flux* no. 40 (2012).

<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/40/60277/conceptual-art-and-eastern-europe-part-i/>.

<sup>7</sup> Zsuzsa László. “Works and Words. The Invention and Renunciation of the Concept of East European Art.” *Institute of The Present* (2018). <https://institutulprezentului.ro/en/2018/11/15/works-and-words-the-invention-and-renunciation-of-the-concept-of-east-european-art/>

<sup>8</sup> Piotrowski: 53.

meaning for the East Central European region to that of Western Europe.<sup>9</sup> Further clarifying the position of Groy and Andel, Piotrowski explains how even though the context of the art may have been different, art did in fact develop within the orbit of Western culture. This was the case mostly due to the aspiration to remain part of Western Europe and its culture rather than to be associated with that of Russia and the East,<sup>10</sup> which is interesting as one of the main goals of communist societies was to remain uninfluenced and to block any incoming influence of Western culture.

In this thesis, I will be using the case of the De Appel ‘Works and Words’ international manifestation to draw parallels to the more general art historical gap entwined with this region. This will be done by resurfacing the large and very detailed archive of the ‘Works and Words’ manifestation located at De Appel in Amsterdam, to discuss the reality of 1979 in relation to the persisting problem of the perception of East-Central European art in contemporary art history. This will be done in order to show how the perception and recognition of this region’s art and its art history have developed through time. Through the study of this issue I wish to question the possible reasons that have resulted to this region’s misunderstood and stagnant position in the contemporary global map of art history through various theoretical pathways. Rather than aiming for a conclusive answer, I am aiming for a discussion that could lead to different questions that in turn could lead to different answers.

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<sup>9</sup> Piotrowski, “In order to write a history of the arts of the region, historians were forced to focus on the political context of the reception of Western art models, which often radically changed their original meaning: informel meant something else in Poland than in France, a happening had other meanings in Czechoslovakia than in the US, and conceptual art in Hungary was not the same as conceptual art in the United Kingdom.” 54

<sup>10</sup> Piotrowski: 54

# CHAPTER I: INTERNATIONAL ART MANIFESTATION ‘WORKS AND WORDS’, AMSTERDAM 1979.

*“Several times a year important, international art manifestations are organized in Poland and Yugoslavia; many western artists are invited for these meetings. Rarely, however, avant-garde artists from Central Europe are invited to international art events which are regularly organized in West Europe and the USA. Believing that it was high time to break this one-way traffic, we decided to devote part of our 1979 programme to several artists from East-Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia.”<sup>11</sup>*

## 1.1 Works and Words International Art Manifestation, Amsterdam 1979.

After organizing a small exhibition with Polish artists in the Netherlands in 1975, Frank Gribling wanted to organize a more systematic one, with a bigger oversight of the East-Central European avant-garde.<sup>12</sup> The initial research group that started organizing and researching for the purpose of this exhibition at the De Appel included: Wies Smals, Josine van Droffelaar, Aggy Smeets and Piotr Olzanski. At a later phase they were also assisted from theoreticians from the respective countries under investigation: dr. Tomas Straus and Petr Stembera from Czechoslovakia; Józef Robakowski and Sofia Kulik from Poland; by László Beke from Hungary; and by Ješa Denegri and Marijan Susovski from Yugoslavia. Works and words would be an exhibition that would showcase the character of the contemporary art scene of the East Central European countries and one in which the artists would not be chosen based on their nationality (as was the case in the West usually, hence why many East-Central European artists were not usually invited to participate in Western international exhibitions) but based on the merit of their work. “Organizers of exhibitions and events in the West were reproached for disregarding the work of (individual) artists from the East. Artists complained

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<sup>11</sup> Josine van Droffelaar, Piotr Olzanski, *Introduction* in International Art Manifestation Amsterdam ‘Works and Words’. De Appel, 1979, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Gribling, “Levendige experimenten in een niet-kommercieel klimaat.” *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 22 October 1975.

that whenever attention was devoted to them and their work it was always couched in terms of nationality or groupings, and never as individuals worthy of the same attention enjoyed somehow automatically or by default by Western artists.”<sup>13</sup> The art world in Western Europe was dominated by the USA and Gribling wanted to break away from this pattern by showing the West that good and interesting art can also be found in the Eastern socialist states of Europe that shared a similar sensitivity to those of Western Europe.<sup>14</sup>

The International Art Manifestation ‘Works and Words’ took place between the 20<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> September 1979 in Amsterdam. The manifestation was organized by De Appel, which had been recently founded in 1975, in close collaboration with the Foundation Holland Experimental Film, which hosted the film programme; the Fundatie Kunsthuis Amsterdam, which hosted the photo exhibition; and Gallery A (of Harry Ruhé) which presented Endré Tót’s *Gladness Drawings, 1973-1979*. Since the Dutch public had not yet been introduced to the contemporary art scene of East-Central Europe, the De Appel preferred to invite as many artists as possible to provide a good context in which such developments could be seen from multiple perspectives. They also invited a number of theoreticians that would hold lectures so that the public could become better acquainted with the social context in which these artworks were produced in and therefore have a better understanding of the art as well.<sup>15</sup> This would be helpful, especially for the public that would come to the manifestation with a negatively inclined attitude towards the art of Eastern Europe, due to the politics of the time, and presumptuously expecting to be disappointed.

## 1.2 The Research Trips

In order for this international manifestation to take place, some members of the research team, namely Josine van Droffelaar and Aggy Smeets went on two research trips in East-Central Europe to meet artists and get exposed to the local underground art scene themselves. In these research trips, they kept a meticulous log in which they describe conversations or interesting things they encountered when in East-Central Europe. In both their reports, they mention how East-European artists were afraid that this exhibition would turn into some version of the 1977

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<sup>13</sup> Marga van Mechelen, 288.

<sup>14</sup> Frank Gribling, *Levendige experimenten in een niet-kommercieel klimaat*. De Groene Amsterdammer, 22 October 1975.

<sup>15</sup> Josine van Droffelaar, Piotr Olzanski (eds.), *Introduction* in International Art Manifestation Amsterdam: Works and Words, (Amsterdam: De Appel & Roma Publications, 2018): 1.

Venice biennial – The Biennial of Dissent.<sup>16</sup> The fact that all the artists from the different countries would be presented in the same exhibition was one of the major concerns expressed by the artists of all four countries when the research team was explaining the idea.

The reason why these travel reports are so important in researching this period is that they describe the experiences of two Western curators travelling and discussing with East - Central European artists in person. Their views can be considered a primary source for researching this period as well as for analyzing the problematics of identity politics related to this region. After having visited these 4 countries and concluding that most of the artists they conversed with, did not feel comfortable being portrayed and grouped in the same exhibition under the same title, it is interesting that many of them still came and were actually exhibited under such a context. These impressions from the conversation recorded in these reports also justify many of the theories that will be further elaborated on in the coming chapters.

They started off in Poland in the February of 1979. They went to Poznan, Lodz, Warsaw, Lublin and Krakow and met artists from all regions. For every artist they met they wrote a subsequent summary text in which they disclosed their thoughts on the artists which would be useful in making the selection for the manifestation. For example:

“Tereza Murak: she does minimal performancers and poetry. [...] I find her work to be a weak extract of what Zarebski does. Her ‘Action’ (of Lublin in ‘Labyrinth’: she made a dress, I don’t exactly know of sort of material, she sowed grass in the dress, let it hang and then walked around with this dress during her action in the street). I will ask Kostolowski about the materials.”<sup>17</sup>

The overall impression Smeets had of Poland was that there was a very rich and established cultural tradition. Compared to the other countries of the so-called ‘Eastern bloc’ Poland seemed to have more money available for art and culture as well as more artistic

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<sup>16</sup> Aggy Smeets. ‘Verslag oriëntatiereis Polen, Hongarije, CRRS – februari 1979, 7 March 1979, Works and Words archive, Reisverslagen folder, De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 1. (Translated by Konstantinos Megapanos). “In alle landen werd bijna door iedereen de vrees uitgesproken dat hetgeen ‘de appel’ in september 79 wil realiseren teveel op de dissidente biennale van venetië zal gaan lijken.”

<sup>17</sup> Aggy Smeets, 3 (Translated by Konstantinos Megapanos). “Tereza Murak: doet ze minimale performances, poëties. Tijdens afspraak kwam ze niet opdagen, ook niet af. Ik vind haar werk een zwak aftreksel van wat Zarebski doet. Aktie (te Lublin in ‘Labyrinth’: ze had een jurk gemaakt, ik weet niet precies van wat voor materiaal, ze zaaide gras in de jurk, liet deze een tijdje hangen en liep tijdens de aktie met grasjurk rond in de straat). Zal Kostolowski materiaal vragen.”

freedom and a bit more accepting towards ‘Western art’, as can be seen through the many international art exhibitions that were organized.<sup>18</sup> Smeets makes the claim that, from the three countries she visited, Poland was the most dynamic country in relation to art. People had more contact with what was going on in the art world, also in the West.<sup>19</sup>

In Hungary, it seems as though Smeets and van Droffelaar did not have that much time to discuss, due to unforeseen travelling problems. Smeets and van Droffelaar had dinner with László Beke (art historian/ critic), Tibor Hayas (performance and video artist) and Janos Veto (photography artist). She recalls the meeting taking place in a very Freudian manner. (de kern is ervan moeilijk exact weer te geven). She writes that due to the limited time they had to discuss they couldn’t go into much details. Smeets had the feeling that they had a very formal idea and picture of De Appel. Three days of meetings later, she says she was still not sure what the Hungarians thought of the plans for the manifestation, except that they were also not enthusiastic about the Eastern European label.<sup>20</sup> In Hungary they were not able to meet with all the artists they wanted to but Beke said he would cooperate and communicate the idea of De Appel to them. Such artists included Dóra Maurer, Gábor Attalai, Gábor Bódi which all ended up participating in the Works and Words manifestation after all.

In Czechoslovakia (CRRS), Smeets made the observation that artists from Bohemia and Slovakia had very little contact with each other. In Prague, the artists she met told her that in Bratislava artists want to be more avant-garde than the avant-garde.<sup>21</sup> She also noted how in the CRRS one really feels the 1968-trauma which acts as a reference point for the art created there. According to the Czechs, during the 60s there were many more possibilities than for example in Yugoslavia and Poland.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Aggy Smeets, 3 (Translated by Konstantinos Megapanos). “ofschoon de economie er allerbelabberdst is (polen zin gastarbeiter in crrs en hongarije), wordt in dit land relatief veel geld door de regering (via studentunions galleries) in kunst gestoken. (o.a. ook groot opgezette internationale festivals – beldeende kunst en theater vooral) . Ook had ik de indruk dat de financiële positie van de kunstenaars iets beter was dan in de overige landen – toch moeten velen ook hier de kost verdienen met een gewone baan.

<sup>19</sup> Aggy Smeets, 3 (Translated by Konstantinos Megapanos). “van de 3 door mij bezochte landen is Polen momenteel het meest dynamiese land op kunstgebied; men heeft er ook het meeste contact met wat er gaande is binnen de kunstwereld in andere, ook westerse, landen. Dit laatste is merkbaar in het werk dat er gemaakt wordt: vaak heb je de indruk dat men achter de internationale tendensen aanloopt. (behalve in performance en theater).”

<sup>20</sup> Aggy Smeets, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Aggy Smeets, 14.

<sup>22</sup> Aggy Smeets, 14 (Translated by Konstantinos Megapanos). “wat je in CRRS meteen merken is het ‘1968-trauma’ – dit blijkt steeds een referentiekader. In de 60<sup>e</sup> jaren was in CRRS veel meer mogelijk dan b.v. in Yugoslavië en Polen – CRRS nam toen de avant-garde positie in binnen het oosblok. (volgens de Tjechen).”

Van Droffelaar visited Yugoslavia by herself. She offers quite a descriptive account of her experience during her trip. She starts off by reporting how ‘time played a very important role in this trip. The people in these countries have a very different perception of time, another life rhythm (they thought of me as a funny American aunt). The artists that I met had all the time in the world, for themselves, for discussing, nights long – and they needed much more time than I could give them.’<sup>23</sup> Van Droffelaar visited Zagreb, where she stayed with Marina Abramovic, and then went to Belgrade. She says that at the moment she went to visit, it was much harder for the avant-garde to develop and exist in Belgrade than it was in Zagreb. She describes what she witnessed in Belgrade as a cultural isolation. Zagreb on the contrary, was a city that stimulated the production of art, there were many galleries or places where art was exhibited. Ljubljana and Split were not important as artistic centers at this period so she did not visit them.<sup>24</sup>

Van Droffelaar says how she experienced a lot of hesitance towards the idea of the ‘East-West’ confrontation plan. All artists reacted quite fiercely towards the idea of an East-European exhibition.<sup>25</sup> People in Yugoslavia had a very different perception of the ‘East-European’ discussion. For them, Yugoslavia was socialist state, without a totalitarian regime and therefore also had no official state art. Having Yugoslavian artists participate in such a manifestation then compromises its status.<sup>26</sup> “People don’t feel East-European, which underlines the difference between the eastern bloc countries with that of Yugoslavia.”<sup>27</sup> This observation is self-explanatory and describes the problem of the *Grey Zone* very well. The *Grey Zone* is a category all the East-Central European countries have been forced into but don’t feel like the belong in it.

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<sup>23</sup> Josine van Droffelaar. Verslag van mijn reis naar Yugoslavië en Hogarije 10.2 -19.2 1979. 1979, Works and Words archive, Reisverslagen folder, De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands,1. (Translated by Konstantinos Megapanos) “Tijd speelde deze reis steeds een grtoe rol. De mensen hebben in die landen een heel ander tijdsbesef, een ander leefritme (ze vonden mijn een belachelijke americaanse tante). De kunstenaars die ik ontmoette hebben alle tijd van de wereld, voorelkaar, voor discussies, nachten lang, en eisten tijd van mij, veel meer dan ik hen vaak kon geven.”

<sup>24</sup> Josine van Droffelaar, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Josine van Droffelaar, 1 (Translated by Konstantinos Megapanos). “Ik ontmoette veel weerstand tegen ons ‘oost-west’ konfrontatie plan, dat ik werkelijk heel genuanceerd introduceerde. In Beograd wisten een aantal kunstenaars er al vanaf door dat Marina en Uwe er al over hadden gepraat. Alle kunstenaars ageerden heel fel en verwezen naar de z.g.n. dissidenten Biennale en Ursula Kringers plan voor een oost-europese tentoonstelling.”

<sup>26</sup> Josine van Droffelaar: 1.

<sup>27</sup> Josine van Droffelaar, 2 (Translated by Konstantinos Megapanos). “Men voelt zich niet oost-europees, onderstreept het verschil tussen de verschillende ‘oostblok’ landen onderdeling en met Yugoslavië.”

For van Droffelaar, the problem with Yugoslavia was mostly related to the economics and cultural sector. There was hardly any private money circulating, only state galleries that were all subsidized by the government. She felt as though there was no deeply engraved cultural tradition in Yugoslavia, in the same way that she felt and witnessed in Poland. Contrary to Poland, the more traditional art seemed to be more popular. Art students were taught to paint in the abstract expressionist or surrealist manner. In a way it seems as though the conditions in Yugoslavia were quite limiting and did not allow for the avant-garde to flourish in the same way it did in Poland.<sup>28</sup>

The general outcome of this research trip was that Smeets and van Droffelaar could make a selection of which artists they wanted to invite but also to understand why they could not group these artists under the term ‘Eastern European’. The issues and conversations they encountered are still relevant to this day and much of what they wrote about has also been discussed by theoreticians in an academic setting (discussed also in the following chapters). This not only shows how the problem is indeed not only a scholarly or art historical issue, but an ongoing socio-political one as well. In every country they experienced a different cultural and artistic environment where the differences were not small but in most cases strikingly different – such as the case with Bohemia and Slovakia and Yugoslavia and Poland. In hindsight, after such an experience in East Central Europe, the choice to go ahead with an eastern bloc exhibition seems peculiar. What connects this region is the plurality and distinctiveness of each country, the ongoing trend or link is that there is no link associating one art scene to the other – the link is rather political (the Soviet regime) and estranged to the culture of the countries themselves.

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<sup>28</sup> Josine van Droffelaar, 2 (Translated by Konstantinos Megapanos). “Probleem in Y. Is van economische en kulturele aard. Er is weinig privé geld (ekonomie is zwak; geen kunstmarkt; alleen staatsgalleries, die allemaal gesubsidieerd worden volgens een pluraliteits-politiek. Veel mensen die ik sprak wezen op de kulturele traditie, zoals in b.v. Polen; geen visie bij de overheid w.b. kunst; de meer traditionele kunst is in de meerderheid (zowel in de galleries als op de akademies, waar men wel met de opvattingen van Marx en Lenin gekonfronteerd wordt maar waar studenten leren schilderen in abstract-expressionistische of surrealistische trant. Er wordt betrekkelijk veel geld besteed aan sociaal kultureel werk in de fabrieken b.v. er worden creativiteitswerkplaatsen ongericht, waarop de meeste kunstenaars veel kritiek hadden als zijnde zeer ‘bourgeois’.”

## 1.3 The Dilemma /Title.

GORAN ĐORĐEVIĆ  
 11. hula. r 133. 13  
 11070 N. Beograd  
 Yugoslavia

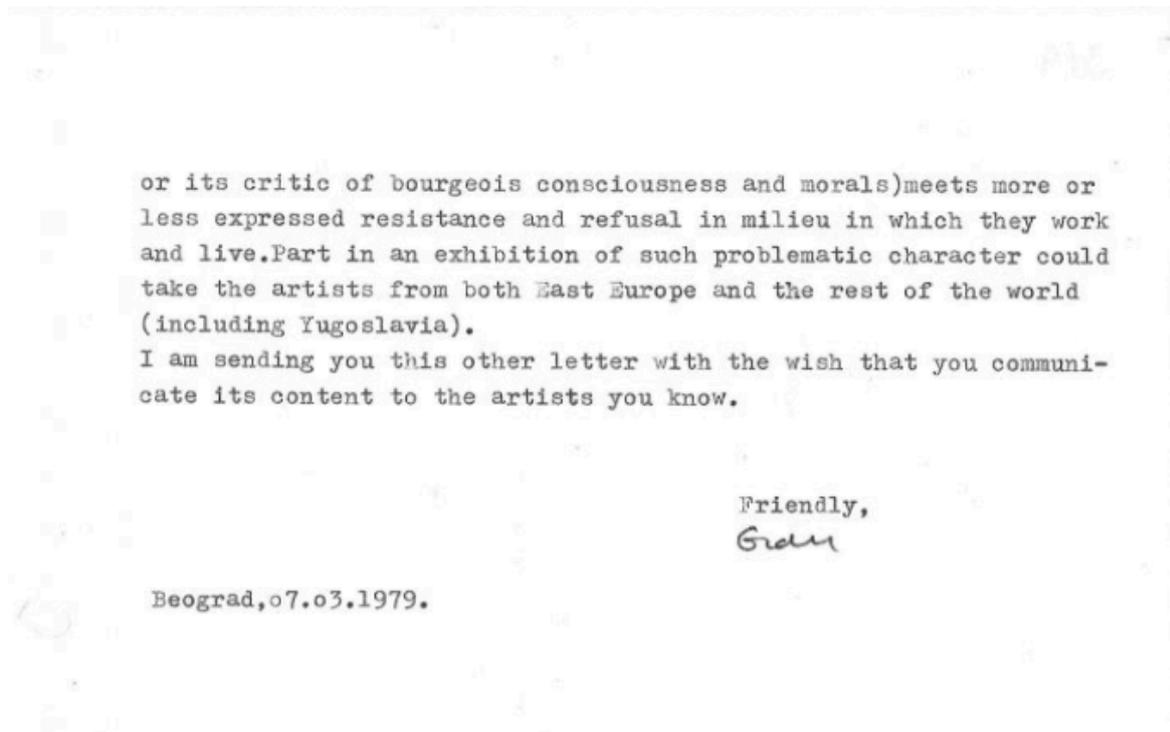
Dear Josine,

I believe that your own experience gave you the opportunity to notice important differences between artists from Yugoslavia and these from East European countries concerning the social/cultural context in which they work and their relation to the present art practise in the world. On that ground, as well as on the ground of the well known international position of Yugoslavia and her relation to the existing military-political blocs, I think any organizing of the exhibition of the artists from "East Europe" (with Yugoslavia) or "East Europe and Yugoslavia" is not justified.

It is a common practise that the artists invited to the exhibitions of the East European artists are those that have no recognized status of the artist in their own environment, which practically deprives their work of elementary forms of social support. Such social status and the lack of knowledge of other cultural/artistic environments does not give them a possibility of choice when invited to any art manifestation (exhibition) abroad. They are practically forced to accept any offer since these are rare occasions when their work has recognized artistic status, and on the other hand, this exhibition should explicitly or implicitly reaffirm the "unlimited" freedom of artistic activities and "universality" of cultural/artistic practise of the West. In that way the significance of such "ghetto" exhibition is, mainly, reduced to its political dimension (dissident exotic), while the nature of the works themselves, their problematic character and significance are pushed into the background. I am of the opinion that a much better and more honest way of presenting these artists would be through their participation in the exhibition of problematic rather than geo-political character, on equal terms with the artists from other countries. All the rest comes down to being a common manipulation (both political and artistic) and abuse of the position of the artists in their own environment.

I believe that a much more interesting thing would be to organize an international exhibition/meeting of the artists whose work (because of its radical attitude towards the existing art praxis,

Figure 1a. Letter from Goran Đorđević to Josine van Droffelaar. Found in the Archives of De Appel. Amsterdam, The Netherlands. May 2019.



*Figure 1b. Letter from Goran Đorđević to Josine van Droffelaar. Found in the Archives of De Appel. Amsterdam, The Netherlands. May 2019.*

The initial idea for the ‘Works and Words’ manifestation was to create a retrospective exhibition of the so-called Eastern-European avant-garde. The project was bound to face problems with the initial idea being a ‘West-East’ confrontation, an exhibition with the title “OOST-EUROPA” (East Europe). It is peculiar that after having visited the East Central European countries, De Appel proceeded with wanting to make an exhibition under such a title. Naturally, there was a lot of critique about the entire idea, certain artists refused to take part, others sent letters expressing their disapproval of the concept to of this exhibition. Of the most straight forward, and to some extent provocative letters, were the ones sent by Goran Đorđević and László Beke.

In this well versed and argued letter to van Droffelaar, but also addressed to the organization of this exhibition, Goran Đorđević explains why the grouping and the concept for this exhibition is disrespectful for artists from Yugoslavia. Đorđević calls for a critical reevaluation of the manifestation that De Appel was organizing. Rather than making an exhibition that focuses on a geo-political denominator (that is basically the only thing that groups artists from East Central Europe) he suggests that “a more honest way of presenting these artists would be through their participation in the exhibition of problematic rather than geo-political character, on equal terms with the artists from other countries. [...] much more

interesting thing would be to organize an international exhibition/ meeting of the artists whose work (because of its radical attitude towards the existing art praxis, or its critic of bourgeois consciousness and morals) meets more or less expressed resistance and refusal in milieu in which they work or live”<sup>29</sup> such an exhibition would have been of a much more inclusive and democratic nature.

Whilst Đorđević tries to tackle an identity and representation problem, being that this exhibition promotes a certain cultural ghettoization that reduces the art produced in Eastern Europe to a purely political significance ignoring personal character and problematics that the artists initially referred to. He however, does not completely argue against an Eastern European exhibition, but just insists that Yugoslavia should not be part of it. It seems as though as though the concept of Eastern Europe did indeed exist for the people of that region and even though each individual nation did not recognize itself as part of Eastern Europe, they recognized each other as such. Đorđević supports the existence of an ‘Eastern Europe’, but Yugoslavia is just not part of it for him. As he claims he does not even support the inclusion of artists from Yugoslavia in an exhibition of ‘Eastern European and Yugoslavian’ art.

Once van Droffelaar received the letter from Đorđević she immediately contacted the Hungarian theoretician László Beke for advice. During their visit to Budapest, van Droffelaar and Smeets met with László Beke and Loránd Hegyi who both worked in the art historical institute of Budapest. They had many discussions about the East-West problem and interrogated van Droffelaar and Smeets on the choices of artists they had made. Both theoreticians believed that van Droffelaar and Smeets were not staying in Hungary long enough for a sufficient orientation and understanding of the Hungarian art scene in relation to ‘Eastern Europe’ in general.<sup>30</sup> Van Droffelaar herself noted in her report that “Met behulp van László Beke en Tibor Hajas ontstond toch een (vaag) beeld van de actuele kunst situatie” (with the help of László Beke we got a vague idea of the current art situation in Hungary).<sup>31</sup> They quickly however set up a close collaboration with Beke who would later on provide texts and

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<sup>29</sup> Figure 1 a-b.

<sup>30</sup> Josine van Droffelaar, 7 (Translated by Konstantinos Megapanos). “Ik ontmoette in Budapest same met Aggy: László Beke en Lorand Gegyi allebei werkszaam op het kunsthistorisch instituut in B. Discussies over oost-west confrontatie laiden weer op. Veel protest. Veel vragen over criteria die we hanteerden bij de keuze van de kunstenaars. Waarom de een wel en de andere niet? Als we antwoordden dat we ons oriënteerden, dus maak je toch nu al een keuze. Hoe komen we aan de nemen, van wie? De naam Beke vormde wel een soort veiligheidsklep voor ze, maar de ontvredetheid vleeft.”

<sup>31</sup> Josine van Droffelaar, 7.

lectures at the actual event in Amsterdam and would also help them choose artists for the manifestation.

In his reply, Beke agrees with Đorđević: “My opinion about the letter of the Yugoslavian artist is in relation with my opinion about your project.”<sup>32</sup> He also agrees that this exhibition’s geopolitical definition (of Eastern Europe) is burdened with biased cultural connotations that this is not representative of the art or the artists of this region. He also asks, instead of focusing on a geographic grouping, why not focus on the problematics the artists of Eastern Europe were addressing in their art instead? This is a common theme and sentiment amongst all artists and theoreticians yet for some reason this was not being translated or stressed enough during the research trip resulting in a situation where de Appel team was personally confronted by the people it wished to invite to the manifestation.

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<sup>32</sup> See Figure 2.

Budapest, 21. 3. 79.

Dear Aggy,

many thanks for your letter from Nurnberg and the recent one too.

Concerning your feelings: I could write you know a letter of 20 pages about that and nothing in the same time. If you ever could come to you to give a lecture about "Contemporary Hungarian Art" I'd prefer to choose an under-title for it: "Aggy in Budapest" & I'd try to explain this very complex situation. - You know, I met about 30-40 people (or more) in the course of the years who came with similar aims than you. This is the reason of the difference between the "two László": the second one wanted to be very operative (because I know from experiences that without lists of names etc. you could not make anything). Only I wanted to arrange this kind of shifts already ~~the~~ on the first night and after relax, while you preferred the reversed way. As I understood that you were incapable to work on the day of your arrival, I got very nervous because in generally I used to have no free time on Saturdays because of the family (and ~~it~~ in the same time I was sure that you could not make anything without me and so one and so one and so one

My opinion about the letter of the Yugoslavian artist (who was it? Goran Tribulja?) is ~~related~~ in relation with my opinion about your project. This friend from Beograd ~~is~~ completely right: i.e. definitions of geo-political kind have always connotations like "ghetto". And I do not like ghettos, me too. Also I prefer to deal with my very personal art problems (coincidences in my life, questions of "limits") (Tibor too) but I can't forget in the same time that - unfortunately - I have to do something for the other artists that is for a movement, that is for "East European Art" (but I do not like "movements"). And why not to consider ghetto-problems as personal problems??

Anyway, the Yugoslavian letter is a good document for your project.

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Figure 2. Letter from László Beke in response to Josine van Droffelaar. Found in De Appel archive, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. May 20

After such a negative reaction towards attending an exhibition titled 'Oost-Europa' project and the experience van Droffelaar and Smeets had during their research trip to East-Central Europe the De Appel workgroup responsible for this exhibition decided to propose an alternative name. They decided to drop any term related to the East or Eastern Europe and take a completely different approach. The titles proposed (as can be seen in figure 6.) were: 'Beyond Mutual

Fantasies; Further Acquaintance, About Art and Other Things; and Works and Words’.<sup>33</sup> Needless to say is that the title ‘Works and Words’ was chosen. The title ‘Works and Words’ related to the general trends of the time was meant to “focus attention on a common principle, in this case the relationship and focus of the I AM event. It was a way of pointing to the existence of a cross-border international avant-garde, in which the only differences lay in the fact that it had developed on either side of the political and social divide.”<sup>34</sup>

As Marga van Mechelen claims in her report and has already been extensively discussed: looking back at this event in comparison to the International Art manifestation IAM in Warsaw she claims that the artists “wanted to be judged on the merit of their work and not on their geographical origin. “Eastern Europe” was a tainted word for them—they preferred “Middle” or “Central Europe”. And it should be noted that some of them felt a greater affinity with Western European and American artists and their work, than with the work of their own countrymen.”<sup>35</sup> This title problem proved to be very problematic in the development of the exhibition as well as the participation of many artists.

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<sup>33</sup> See Figure. 3

<sup>34</sup> Marga van Mechelen, 287.

<sup>35</sup> Marga van Mechelen 288



## 1.4 Outcome and Critique

*“During the event it became clear, yet again, how big the differences were amongst Eastern bloc countries, even between cities within the same country, as with Belgrade and Zagreb or Bratislava and Prague. More than ten years before the breakup”<sup>36</sup>*

The opening speech of the international art manifestation was delivered by Loek van der Sande, the chairman of the board of Stichting De Appel. In this speech he starts off by pointing out how not all the artists invited to participate from East – Central Europe were able to attend (primarily the Czechoslovaks, since they were not authorized with travel visas). The aim of this project as he explains, was the “active exchange of ideas between artists, scientists, and critics from your countries and the Netherlands.”<sup>37</sup> According to van der Sande, the De Appel decided to carry out such a project because the contemporary work of East-Central European artists remained largely unknown to the Dutch public and art scene. He claims that “this is fully in line of the basic philosophy of the Appel which is the constant confrontation, presentation and documentation of those aspects of visual arts that have not yet achieved an entry in the traditional art institutions like the regular galleries and museums.”<sup>38</sup> He continues by making the distinction of the peculiar situation of De Appel as an institution that is privately run but sponsored by the government in the form of a yearly grant in which the institution has to defend a yearly plan every year in order to acquire the funding and the state controlled galleries and institutions in East-Central Europe.

This stale and binary focused introduction to the manifestation, the comparison of a western institution to the more state-controlled East-Central European ones, may not have been the best opening to such a manifestation. In the end, according to van Mechelen, it seems as though the Dutch may have learnt more from the invited countries than the other way around: “Despite the many conflicts among the visiting artists, however, all made a strong impression on the Dutch participants, indirectly pointing out substantial weaknesses in the way art functioned in the Netherlands, in particular the attendant bureaucracy. While this was never voiced outright, one got the clear impression, between the lines, that the Netherlands still had a lot to learn from these countries. Plainly, debate over the content and form in which art should operate commonly was and went a lot further in the four Eastern European countries

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<sup>36</sup> Marga van Mechelen, 287.

<sup>37</sup> Loek van der Sande, Opening Works and Words Speech, 20 September 1979, Works and Words Archive, Press and Publications Folder, De Appel, 1.

<sup>38</sup> Loek van der Sande, 1.

represented. Despite all of the controversies and, for various reasons, the limited number of artist-participants, many felt that a great deal was achieved with *Works and Words*—if nothing else, it certainly served to encourage mutual communication between the artists of a greater Europe”<sup>39</sup>

Due to the tight budget that De Appel was running on, the organizing team had to make some decisions prior to the event. One of the choices they had to make was either to invite few artists and provide luxurious accommodation and flexible budget for them during their stay, or invite as many as possible and try to find smart and cheap ways in which they could accommodate them. The team went with the second option, and most invited artists came to the Netherlands thinking they would be accommodated in luxurious hotels, all ended lodging at the houses of the Dutch artists and volunteers that were participating at the manifestation. In the eye-witness report by Louwrien Mijes she has described or camouflaged this as: “All those participants who had come to Holland stayed with members of the contemporary Dutch art scene. Foundation De Appel had especially programmed the housing in this way to invoke a close contact between hosts and guests, between the different art societies.”<sup>40</sup> This was however not what the visiting artists were expecting.

In the end most of the artists that were invited were able to attend except artists from the CSSR. As stated previously, this was because they were not able to acquire their travel visas to come to the Netherlands. One of the artists however, Jiří Kovanda who was also mentioned in the travel reports of the research trip to the ČSSR, is reported as a “heel jong conceptueel kunstenaar (...) heel minimal (...) deed me aan het werk van Karel Miler en hier bij ons Harrie de Kroon denken.”<sup>41</sup> (A young conceptual artist, very minimal, made me think of the works of Karel Miler and of Harrie Kroon here in the Netherlands.) Since he was not able to make it to the manifestation, he wrote a letter, specifically addressed to Harrie de Kroon with a drawing and instructions on how to set his installation up. This was a true instance of how artists could use conceptual art to truly cross borders and restraints of the Iron Curtain.

Over the course of 10 days, the manifestation took place in different locations in Amsterdam where East-Central European artists were exhibited alongside Dutch ones. A number of lectures and discussions also took place between East-Central European artists but also amongst them Dutch scholars and theoreticians. For every section of the manifestation, be

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<sup>39</sup> Marga van Mechelen, 292.

<sup>40</sup> Louwrien Mijes, Witness Report September, *Works and Words in Amsterdam 1979*. Works and Words Archive, Reports and Research Folder, De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Aggy Smeets, 17

it lectures, performances, photography exhibitions or installations, East-Central European artists were exhibited alongside the Dutch artists, also as a way to possibly provoke a more critical and comparative approach – to break through this negative bias linked to anything Eastern, created by the politics of the time.

According to the *Volkskrant* article written by Marga van Mechelen on October 2<sup>nd</sup> 1979, a few days after the closing of the international art manifestation *Works and Words*, if anything, “one thing became clear during the manifestation [...] the approach to contemporary art in Poland, Yugoslavia, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, does not only differ from one another, but even more strongly from that of the Netherlands”<sup>42</sup> For artists of East Central Europe, van Mechelen observed that the theory forming related to the art is of pivotal importance and interest, such as constantly questioning the function of art but also attempting to demythologize it. During their stay, the visiting artists noted quite a difference in the cause of the art made in the Netherlands as well as in the reactions or non-reactions of the Dutch public towards their art.<sup>43</sup> In general, the Dutch public, but also the Dutch artists found it hard to understand the art presented by the East-Central European artists as the context and ideas they were putting forth were of an alien nature to them.

For Karel Schampers (director of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam at the time), the manifestation was not of a sufficient niveau. He describes experiencing a very low level of artistic merit. “From what I have seen, I must say that I was disappointed. The films and the videotapes, especially those of Józef Robakowski and Ryszard Waśko, were quite dated in general, and resembled works of first year art students. It seemed as if most of the artists were holding a camera for the first time and were testing out the possibilities of photography as a different/ new medium of art. It was investigative but seemed like it was made without any effort. The photo exhibition, which was focused on conceptual photography, was of a reasonable standard. The strange thing was that a number of artists sent in the same works they had sent in for the exhibition “*Oosteuropese Conceptuele Fotografie* (Eindhoven, 1977). You want to ask yourself whether these artworks, for them, are masterworks; or if according to their taste, these are the works they think mostly resemble the Western tradition. As for the

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<sup>42</sup> Marga van Mechelen. *Internationale Appel-Manifestatie, Oosteuropese kunst stelt theorie voorop*. *Volkskrant* 2 oktober 1979. Press releases 1979 Folder, *Works and Words*, De Appel Archive, Amsterdam, The Netherlands (Translated by Konstantinos Megapanos). “Een ding is wel duidelijk geworden tijdens de internationale manifestatie „ *Works and Words*” die de Stichting De Appel de afgelopen tien dagen in Amsterdam organiseerde: de benadering van de actuele kunst in de landen Polen, Joegoslavië, Hongarije en Tsjechoslowakije, verschilt niet alleen onderling, maar nog sterker met die van Nederlands.”

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

performances, only the Pole Jerzy Beres stood out. While the others made a rather artificial, cramped and sought-after impression, Beres was able to give meaning to ideas in such a simple, direct and intense way during a kind of ritual act that they immediately appealed to. The forums and readings, were characterized by a special dullness: the discussions that followed, were mostly extremely superficial and confrontations of different points of views were rare. In short, it wasn't that uplifting."<sup>44</sup>

Frank Gribling, in his review, explained that "the post avant-garde period, which appears after Concept Art, is characterized by the coexistence of all kinds of aesthetic views, which all share that they cannot and must not be researched and analyzed in relation to their form, but in relation to the developments of new contexts and the transformation of the cultural consciousness of social groups."<sup>45</sup> He gave a less emotional and more focused critique of the exhibition taking into account the trends in art history. Schampers clearly approaches this work in a modernist way, forming an opinion purely based on a formalistic review of the works. Gribling seems to have identified a more general and overarching historical problem. He says that "inviting by definition marginal artists from the socialist countries raises the suspicion that a "blocking" mentality has generally been assumed, which can be associated with the cold war."<sup>46</sup> Leaving the term "Eastern Europe" from the title of this manifestations may give the

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<sup>44</sup> **Karel Schampers** Review 'Works and Words', 1979. Research Folder, Digital Works and Words Archive, De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. "Van wat ik heb gezien, moet ik zeggen dat het me nogal tegenviel. De films van Józef Robakowski en Ryszard Waśko, waren over het algemeen nogal gedateerd en hadden veel weg van werkstukken van eerstejaars akademiestudenten. Het leek alsof de meeste kunstenaars voor het eerst een kamera in hun handen hadden en aan het uitproberen waren wat zoal de mogelijkheden van het medium zijn. Het was onderzoekend, maar zonder enige spanning en te vrijblijvend. De fototentoonstelling, waar de nadruk lag op de conceptuele fotografie, was redelijk van niveau, maar het vreemde was dat een aantal kunstenaars hetzelfde werk had ingezonden als destijds voor de tentoonstelling 'Oosteuropese Conceptuele Fotografie' (Eindhoven, 1977). Je vraagt of je af of dit nou hun meesterwerken zijn of dat het werken zijn die naar hun smaak het dichtst tegen westeruropese kunsttraditie aanliggen en die ze dan ook voor elke buitenlandse tentoonstelling inzenden. Wat de performances betreft, sprong alleen de Pool Jerzy Berés eruit. Maakten de anderen nogal kunstmatige, verkrampte en gewilde indruk, Berés wist tijdens een soort van rituele handeling zijn ideeën op zo' n eenvoudige, directe en intense wijze vorm te geven, dat ze onmiddellijk aanspraken. De forums en lezingen tenslotte, werden gekenmerkt door een bijzondere matheid; de discussie die volgde, zo die volgde, was meestal uiterst oppervlakkig en konfrontaties standpunten waren een zeldzaamheid. Kortom, erg opbeurend was het allemaal niet.

<sup>45</sup> **Frank Gribling** Review 'Works and Words' 1979. Research Folder, Digital Works and Words Archive, De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. "De postavangarde periode, die zich nu na de Conceptkunst aandient, wordt gekarakteriseerd door het naast elkaar bestaan van allerlei esthetische opvattingen, die gemeen hebben dat niet meer het vormonderzoek centraal staat maar de ontwikkeling van nieuwe inhouden en de transformatie van het kultureel bewustzijn van sociale groepen."

<sup>46</sup> Frank gribling" Het uitnodigen van per definitie marginale kunstenaars uit de socialistische landen, roept de verdenking op dat er generaliserend is uitgegaan van een 'blokken' mentaliteit, die geassocieerd kan worden met de koude oorlog. Met opzet was het etiket 'Oost-Europa' daarom zoveel mogelijk vermeden. Zo nadrukkelijk dat bij de presentatie naar buiten bijna de indruk werd gewekt

impression that artists were invited based on their qualitative capabilities but that was not entirely the case. One of the reasons this manifestation took place make the public and the artworld, that is dominated by the U.S., more aware of what was happening in these socialist countries. As a closing remark to his critique, Frank Gribbling says how the “contact with artists from a context so different to the that of the Netherlands has in any case made it clear that in the socialist countries more than here, an active conceptual interest determines the views on art.” In a way this closing remark may have captured the essence of this manifestation. (het contact met kunstenaars uit een aan Nederland zo verschillende kontekst heeft in elk geval duidelijk gemaakt, dat in de socialistische landen meer dan hier een aktieve koceptuele belangstelling de opvattingen over kunst bepaalt)

Nevertheless, in a live broadcast interview with the Dutch television channel: VPRO with Evelyn Jansen, Van Droffelaar was asked about the purpose of this manifestation, especially related to the purpose of performance art. The concept of performance was still very new, and especially in the context it was being presented then. the public could not understand what they are seeing. In questioning van Droffelaar, Jansen claimed that painting is easier to understand and asked why performance is so difficult. Van Droffelaar doesn’t necessarily reply in the clearest way, saying that the uncertainty and confusion the public feels is good. That one has to open oneself to the possibility of incomprehension during the performance and then there will always be a panel for discussion between the artist and the public for question. But if one goes into the performance with the presumption that it will be nonsense then you close yourself up to the possibility of experiencing something. There are no rules in performance the same way there are for football. This makes one wonder how successful the entire event was if the general public was not able to understand anything of what was going on.<sup>47</sup>

From a historical standpoint, Marga van Mechelen concludes that in contrast to the very successful ‘Warsaw I AM international manifestation’, ‘Works and Words’, which was supposed to be a continuation of the Warsaw I AM, was ‘a semi-failure’. She explains how Works and Words was meant to be equally as and even more productive and engaging than the 1978 manifestation in Warsaw but which unfortunately was not the case. According to her, this

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dat toevallig een aantal kunstenaars op kwalitatieve gronden was uitgenodigd. Dat was nu ook weer niet zo. Een van de redenen om deze keer speciale aandacht te besteden aan kunstenaars uit een aantal socialistische landen was dat in onze door de Verenigde Staten gedomineerde kunstwereld weinig informatie uit deze landen doordringt.

<sup>47</sup> Josine van Droffelaar, interviewed by Evelyn Jansen. Title: Ontzettend Moeielijk en Niet Envoudig (Extremely Difficult and Not Easy) VPRO Television Broadcast, September 1979t. Press Release and Research Folder, Works and Words Archive, De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

was mostly due to the political situation in Europe and an overlying sense and suspicion amongst the visiting artists that this was an oriental/ exhibitionist manifestation meant to portray these artists and their work in a Western way.<sup>48</sup>

Van Mechelen goes on to explain a more general phenomenon, mostly relevant to non-Western art and artists: “organizers of exhibitions and events in the West were reproached for disregarding the work of (individual) artists from the East. Artists complained that whenever attention was devoted to them and their work it was always couched in terms of nationality or groupings, and never as individuals worthy of the same attention enjoyed somehow automatically or by default by Western artists. That perceived tendency would leave its mark on Works and Words, with both organizers and participants ultimately failing to dispel all such criticism and distrust.”<sup>49</sup>

In general, the manifestation was confronting, both for the Dutch public and artists but also for the East-Central European artists, as their expectations of the ‘West’, in many cases were not even reached. It seems as though there was a tendency towards prejudices and presumptions from both sides. The West assumed a very alternative, probably incomprehensible and ‘poor’ (lacking in quality) work, whilst at the same time the East-Central European artists assumed they would be misrepresented leading to a more defensive rather than an open mindset, not really willing to explain their works and concepts as they thought they wouldn’t be understood anyway. Even though the critiques ranged from quite harsh to more understanding the ‘Works and Words’ manifestation was one of the not so many attempts to bring both sides of the Iron Curtain together on the East before the fall of the Wall. Even though a resolution was not reached, it was a good opportunity to see how these neighboring sides of the art world were moving parallel to each other, which also maybe proves the opaqueness of the Iron Curtain after all.

### 1.5 FOOTNOTES #3 Works and Words

“That perceived tendency would leave its mark on Works and Words, with both organizers and participants ultimately failing to dispel all such criticism and distrust.”

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<sup>48</sup> Marga van Mechelen: Works and Words (1979) in the shadow of I AM (1978). In: Christian Höller (ed.). *L’Internationale Post-War Avant-Gardes Between 1957 and 1986*. (JRP/Ringier Zürich, 2012),285.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 288.

A topic that is very much in the centre of art historical research and rethinking is that of globalization and the possibility and existence of multiple (marginalized) historical narratives. The art historical discipline is going through a phase of which old narratives are being re-visited with a more critical eye, heroic stories of old masters are being reconceptualised and art histories from other regions are being considered or even studied by Western historians for the first time. The 1979 manifestation of Works and Words belongs to this field of research, as the geographical region of East – Central Europe, after WWII, made little to no appearances in the academic setting of the Western academia. Therefore, the art scene of East-Central Europe, or to put it more bluntly, the art scene behind Iron Curtain was very quickly marginalised and forgotten. The fact that De Appel acknowledged and tried to bridge and declare this gap in 1979 was very innovative and progressive for its time. The 1979 Works and Words manifestation, for some acquired quite a legacy however things back then did not look as amazing as they do 40 in retrospect.

The FOOTNOTES exhibition format is a recent development of De Appel. It is a complementary exhibition, as the name suggests, *a footnote* to a main exhibition, aiming to build upon, comment or deconstruct a motive from the main De Appel exhibition. The Footnote exhibitions are part of the De Appel Archive series, and they take on a historical perspective. In this case, the FOOTNOTES #3 Works and Words project developed alongside the exhibition of Tamàs Kaszás. The purpose of this Footnotes project was to uncover and reveal the archives of this unique happening, and to open up the possibilities of further research in this understudied topic of East-Central European art and art history. This was done via an online platform in which information of this manifestation with original material would be shared to entice researchers across the world but also to show off all the primary material contained within the De Appel Archive in Amsterdam.

For the occasion of the Footnotes #3 Works and Words and the 40-year anniversary since the original 1979 Works and Words international manifestation, De Appel took the opportunity to launch a reprint of the original catalogue and to organize a commemorative event in collaboration with the EYE Filmmuseum in Amsterdam. For the purpose of this event, all the participants of the 1979 Works and Words were contacted and invited to come to this event and would also be sent a copy of this catalogue. Additionally to that, the information published on the online blog of Works and Words, would many times be consulted by them or other theoreticians. The main organizer of this event was the De Appel and was helped by the EYE filmmuseum mostly with practical and technical matters, such as providing the space, helping with advertising and the venue.

Through planning the event that would take place at the EYE Filmmuseum in commemoration of the 1979 Works and Words, a number of problems that were faced in the 1979 version, resurfaced. One of the main problems that resurfaced was that of the naming of this event. As was previously discussed, grouping labels involving the terms East and Eastern European were to a large extent considered derogative and misrepresentative of the artists and communities of East-Central Europe. In preparing for the event, a number of titles were suggested, such as ‘Socialist Eastern European Art’ and ‘Art Behind the Iron Curtain.’ The main issue would not be the titles *per se* but that this problem of misrepresentation and lack of awareness of this European problem still persists to this day. A problem that was so central to the planning of the original Works and Words event, had yet again resurfaced 40 years later. Without the archive of correspondence between the artists and theoreticians that revolted against this issue back in 1979, it could have been the case that it might not even have been regarded as a problem in 2018.

The team organizing this event consisted of the archive curator of De Appel, Nell Donkers, Sonja Simonyi who curated the film programme and the programme coordinator of the EYE. Luckily, Sonja Simonyi, of Hungarian descent, was able to step in and make alterations and suggestions for a different title as the problems revolving around cultural ghettoization and representation would have reappeared for the 2018 event as well. Therefore, one can really see the importance of such an archival project such as Footnotes #3, as it opens up the possibility to surface these problems and by discussing and revealing them, pave the way to resolving them.

The event itself took place on the 8th October 2018 and was fully sold out. The night consisted of an opening speech by the (ex) director of De Appel, Niels van Tomme, accompanied by a very brief discussion between Sonja Simonyi and Kaspars Reinis about the significance of this manifestation back in 1979 and the importance of this archival project. The night then continued with two- half- hour blocks of film and/as art put together by Sonja Simonyi and a performance by a contemporary Polish performance artist, Wojciech Bąkowski.

Something that was very lacking in this public event, and would probably also have been called a semi-failure by Marga van Mechelen, was openly talking about the issues that have remained stagnant and unresolved since 1979, such as the issues of representation and the Western presentation of East-Central European Art. The fact that the title that was chosen for this event: ‘Works and Words: Film and Art from 1970’s Central Europe’, still is haunted by some sort of unclarity concerning the ambiguity of the term ‘Central European’- the possible surprise when encountered with the fact that this means art from countries such as Hungary,

The Czech Republic, Poland etc. - is an issue in itself. There was a conversation platform between Sonja Simonyi and Kaspars Reinis, both from what once used to be the so-called Eastern bloc, yet no emphasis was placed on the issues so relevant to the development, or stagnation of East-Central European art history and identity.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

Through the history of Works and Words, it is obvious that there are certain historical issues relating to representation and the perception of East-Central European art that have remained issues in the 40 years since its official staging. This manifestation may have been described as a semi-failure but in either case, it was a point in time where the artists and cultures from a divided Europe intersected in order to initiate a dialogue and exchange ideas and see that what was going on between the so-called West and East may not have been that different after all. The different critiques the Works and Words manifestation received are to a great extent still very relevant today and they also uncover many different biases related to East-Central European art. A bias that was created as a result of the politics of the time, connecting Eastern Europe and mostly the USSR with a social and cultural threat, left its mark in art too – with many people, even today, reserve within them a certain presumption that any cultural product of this region will not be as good as those made in the West, whatever good may mean.

In a very relevant essay contained within the original Works and Words catalogue of 1979, Jaroslav Andel has expressed his opinion about his contemporary art world (still relevant today): “No wonder the issue of territorial, local, national (in contrast to international) aspects of contemporary art seems to have given up the ghost and if one feels it does deserve attention one may easily be suspected of awakening the discredited ideas of nationalism or whatever. But is the international or rather super-national look of contemporary art really a reality? The very fact this exhibition (works and words) is taking place testifies to the existence of hidden expectations, that different circumstances and conditions cannot fail to have an effect upon the nature of works created. [...] How is it possible that in very different conditions the same artistic expressions can spring into existence? The well-known fact that an expression can have different meanings in different contexts suggests that the pieces from the socialist countries that look similar to the western ones may have different meanings in their original contexts. The very fact that the avant-garde artist himself and his activities have a different status in the

two systems leads one to ask whether the different meanings of the same expression can be explored at all within the present conceptual framework.”<sup>50</sup>

It is hard to explain why one has such different views of art, that in practice looks very cohesive, but because of who it is made, and therefore the context in which it was made in, make one perceive the art differently. Karel Schampers’ impression of the works represented, express exactly this bias towards art from this region. He did not make any comments on the Dutch artists’ work but thrashed that of the visiting artists. Similarly, to how Josine van Droffelaar explained to the interviewer how in order to understand performances you must be willing to open your mind up to different art forms and different expressions. Going into the exhibition with predetermined expectations and not asking questions and allowing oneself to understand the different context and therefore the different way and tools required to look at this art, leaves one as Schampers said, ‘not that uplifted’. It could be that the way in which Western viewers have certain expectations of art due to the apparent universalization of Western traditions and aesthetics, therefore have learnt to look at art in a specific way may lead to misunderstandings and the closing up of opportunities. I hypothesize therefore that one of the possible reasons leading to this cultural binarism may be due to an *a priori* set of expectations that have been engraved in Western societies since the enlightenment. These patterns will be discussed through a series of different themes including a historical approach, an art historical approach and then the relating to the aesthetics and then placed in the larger field of global art history, in order to achieve an overarching perception and reasoning as to how and why the above discussion of ‘Works and Words’ is relevant, not only for the region of East Central Europe but also for global art history in general.

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<sup>50</sup> Jaroslav Andel, “The Present Czechoslovakian Art Situation”, in *International Art Manifestations Amsterdam: Works and Words*, eds. Josine van Droffelaar & Piotr Olzanski (Amsterdam: De Appel and Roma Publications, 2018), 69-70.

## Chapter II: The ‘Nylon Curtain’ and East-Central European Identity: A Social Historical Approach.

The post war period brought about many changes on a global scale. The socio-political phenomenon of the Cold War, which started after the end of the war, with the erection of the Berlin Wall and ended with its dismantlement in 1989, separated the world into what seemed to be two ideologically and culturally antagonizing sides.<sup>51</sup> In essence, the purpose of this Iron Curtain was to isolate the East from the West and vice versa in order to control the spread of ‘dangerous’ ideologies from one side to the other. For a long time, when studying this period, the cut between East and West seems to have been extremely stringent, with it being believed that it was practically impossible for ideas and cultures to intersect due to the political measures that had been set to prevent it from happening.<sup>52</sup> In recent research it has increasingly been proven that this was not the case and that even though there was a physical separation between the two ‘fronts’ there was indeed a lot of cross cultural communication as well as similar goals between both sides.

In fact, if one returns to the origins of the term ‘Iron Curtain’ coined by Winston Churchill in his famous speech<sup>53</sup> (Fulton, 5 March 1946), it was implemented as a protective strategy against the global challenge and ‘threat’, of Communism. With these words, Churchill really created a distinction that is still, consciously (or unconsciously) felt by modern societies:

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<sup>51</sup> Peter Romijn, Giles Scott-Smith, and Joes Segal. *Divided dreamworlds?: the cultural cold war in East and West*, (Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>52</sup> Peter Romijn, Giles Scott-Smith, and Joes Segal, 1

<sup>53</sup> Winston Churchill, “The Sinews of Peace (‘Iron Curtain Speech’). (Westminster College, Fulton Missouri, March 5 1946). “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia; all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject, in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and in some cases increasing measure of control from Moscow ....

In a great number of countries, far from the Russian frontiers and throughout the world, Communist fifth columns are established and work in complete unity and absolute obedience to the directions they receive from the Communist centre. Except in the British Commonwealth and in the United States where Communism is in its infancy, the Communist parties or fifth columns constitute a growing challenge and peril to Christian civilization”

the Christian modernized (capitalistic) West against the barbaric, communist East.<sup>54</sup> This of course, not only influenced our perception of the Eastern European societies but also gave us the impression that this Iron Curtain was to cut all influences flowing from East to West and vice versa. György Péteri, in his thesis, comes up with the term Nylon Curtain, instead of Iron Curtain to show how in fact this separation was not as opaque as it seemed.<sup>55</sup> However transparent or translucent this ‘curtain’ seemed to be, it still formed an obstacle for the freedom of movement, both of people and ideas. What has been described to be different than once perceived is the degree to which this obstacle was unpassable or not.

Furthermore, the end of the war and the separation and reshaping of Europe due to the Iron curtain brought with it the changing shape of the entire continent rather than that of individual states. It changed how the transaction of people and ideas took place.<sup>56</sup> The idea of a nylon curtain is one that is increasingly shared amongst historians. “One issue is how we describe and refer to the frontier usually called the Iron Curtain: it could be successively porous or, on the contrary, impassable. In any case, the censorship that the actors endured and/ or practiced in the socialist dictatorships did not mean that they were isolated inside their country. We have to understand the reality of the different frontiers created either by national boundaries or by the Iron Curtain. Like all frontiers, they were both an obstacle – for those stopped by them – and a resource – for those who could cross them, be it physically or mentally.”<sup>57</sup>

There are many examples that can prove the theory of a Nylon Curtain in contrast to that of an Iron Curtain. This thesis in general will focus on the example of artistic and exchange of ideas, but this chapter focuses more on the political parameters involved. One, amongst other examples to portray and prove such phenomenon, was the international art manifestation of Works and Words that took place at the De Appel in Amsterdam in 1979, which was inspired by the IAM international manifestation in Warsaw in 1978. As has already been shown in the previous chapter, even though the presence of both a physical and an ideological barrier was present, the artistic sphere developed in a way that made it possible for both sides to overlap.

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<sup>54</sup> György Péteri. “Nylon Curtain – Transnational and Transsystematic Tendencies in the Cultural Life of State-Socialist Russia and East-Central Europe.” *Slavonica*, no 10 vol 2. (Norwegian University of Science & Technology, Tondheim, 2004). 113.

<sup>55</sup> György Péteri, 115. “The curtain was made of Nylon, not Iron. It was not only transparent but it also yielded to strong osmotic tendencies that were globalizing knowledge across the systemic divide about culture, goods, and services. These tendencies were not only fueling consumer desires and expectations of living standards but they also promoted in both directions the spreading of visions of ‘good society’, of ‘humanism’, as well as of civil, political, and social citizenship.”

<sup>56</sup> Bazin, Jérôme, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski. *Art beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe 1945- 1989*. New York: Central European University Press 2016, 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 2

Works and Words, in particular, can be used as an example to prove the theory of the ‘Nylon Curtain’ and the legacy it has stained European climate with. In fact this section of the thesis will help one understand the core of the problem related to the development of a particular bias towards Eastern Europe in general.

*Divided Dreamworlds? The Cultural Cold War in East and West*, was assembled after a conference held in Utrecht, The Netherlands, in an attempt to re-evaluate the history of the Cold War.<sup>58</sup> The point of this conference and later on, its publication, was to show how things were not as clear cut as they have been presented – the two sides of the Iron Curtain were in fact not as isolated from each other as has been historically advertised, and analyzing this historical period in this way does not suffice in understanding it completely. The aim of this conference was to stress and demonstrate how important and valuable it is to study this period by taking a cross cultural approach. In fact, the organizers of this conference claim that the research presented may “illuminate some of the striking paradoxes involved in the production and reception of culture and science in East and West.”<sup>59</sup>

Without making the claim that the Iron Curtain was a purely decorative term, it is clear that there was a certain degree of intercultural exchange. Both the physical and metaphorical presence of the Iron Curtain definitely made it harder for each side to communicate – after all it is a fact that its purpose was to effectuate this ideological rift in Europe, where this chapter will be focusing on, but also in the world. This ideological rift of course resulted in the development of each region in a different way. Even though the measures that were put in place to prevent the mixing of ideologies were upheld very tightly, both sides witnessed similar impulses and wishes as well as the will for intercultural exchange. As Giles Scott-Smith & Joes Segal claim in their introduction: even though each side had imagined and idealised different utopias or ‘dreamworlds’ as they called it, they also observed that, “[h]owever huge the differences between East European dissidents and the ‘generation of 1968’ in the West, both aimed at a free space, a radical alternative to a reality that, it was felt, failed to live up to its own promises”<sup>60</sup> both in a communist and a capitalist model.

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<sup>58</sup> Peter Romijn, Giles Scott-Smith, and Joes Segal, vii. “The aim of the conference was to investigate the cultural interchange across the East-West border during the Cold War, as a counterbalance to the more traditional academic approaches that study the two power blocs *exclusively* in the light of their antagonistic power interests or political ideals.”

<sup>59</sup> Peter Romijn, Giles Scott-Smith, and Joes Segal, 9.

Also greatly discussed by Piotr Piotrowski, both related to art and not, even though the Iron Curtain no longer exists and most of the prior Eastern-Central European USSR satellite states are now full members of the European Union there is still a margin separating Eastern Europe from Europe. Merje Kuus observes this and explains it as a dual framing of Europe: how even though these states may be part of the European Union family they may not yet be considered sufficiently European.<sup>61</sup> She argues how the European enlargement project was to “finally make Europe ‘whole and free’” but at the same time the same people that argue for this “betray a tacit distinction between Europe and Eastern Europe.”<sup>62</sup> Kuus views this problem from a post colonialist perspective. She compares this expansion to that of the 18<sup>th</sup> century where “Eastern Europe was demarcated as being of Europe by geography but still in the process of becoming European.”<sup>63</sup> This automatically creates the sense of a power dynamic where both in the 18<sup>th</sup> century but also in contemporary history, Eastern Europe is seen more as a developmental – de -barbarization – project which needs to adopt the traits and culture from the West to progress.<sup>64</sup> A similar pattern seems to persist, which is that East Central Europe seems to have maintained a marginalized identity throughout the ages.

This region was and still is treated more as a bloc rather than independent countries. As Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl explain: [t]he various countries and nations of this broadly defined Eastern Europe do not relate to one another; instead, they tend to relate to other cultures and regions: parts of former Yugoslavia to Mediterranean culture; The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, to the history of the Austrian Empire, the Baltic countries to Scandinavia; and the Southern Balkans to the Near East.”<sup>65</sup> This is not a new development in this region, it has always been the case – especially after its marginalisation into a *Grey Zone* during the Cold War. Even when analysing the USSR, East – Central Europe only appeared as mere footnotes to Sovietology. The Cold War was a period of binary distinctions – the West versus the East – and East Central Europe was just a footnote to this story, which has also

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<sup>60</sup> Peter Romijn, Giles Scott-Smith, and Joes Segal, 2.

<sup>61</sup> Merje Kuus. "Europe's eastern expansion and the reinscription of otherness in East-Central Europe." *Progress in Human Geography* 28, no. 4 (2004): 473.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 472.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 474

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 474

<sup>65</sup> Hoptman, Laura J., and Tomáš Pospiszyl, eds. *Primary Documents: a sourcebook for eastern and central european art since the 1950s*. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 9.

affected its marginalized status to this day – especially in the arts as has been dictated through the Works and Words manifestation.

The end of the Cold War brought about the fall of a certain world order that had persisted for many years, it was the chance for Eastern-Central Europe, amongst other regions, to redefine itself. The *Grey Zone* which was neither really part of the West, but had, and still has the ambition to be considered part of it; and cut all ties and association to the East. Identity crises is something that many societies, cultures and sub cultures are faced with since the world started globalizing. Taking into account the recent history of this region, for the majority of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was the colonialist project of the Soviet Union and now by some, is considered the colonialist project of Europe. Even though most of the *Grey Zone* region has been absorbed into the European bubble it is clear that there is still a distinction between Europe and Eastern Europe, leaving the *Grey Zone*, with an undefined identity.

## 2.1 Eastern European Identity Politics

Searching and trying to understand the identity of the *Grey Zone* may seem very paradoxical since as it has just been meticulously discussed through Works and Words manifestation, this region and its contingent countries do not consider themselves a similar and united entity – let alone one with a shared feeling of identity. The only thing they seem to have in common is that they do not want to be associated with the term Eastern Europe as it associates them with a certain way of life and prejudice that they do not feel accurately represents them.

The East-Central European region was caught in the global mess created by the power struggle of the USSR and the USA during the Cold War. For Piotr Piotrowski East-Central Europe, “describes a territory located between the Iron Curtain and the Soviet Union. It is the part of Europe that, due to the agreement signed between the Western powers and the Soviet Union at Yalta, found itself within the latter’s sphere of influence.”<sup>66</sup> Hence the title of his book, *In the Shadow of Yalta*. The term *grey zone*, as described in the introduction, is a term that incorporates both the issue of the region’s geographic territory but also a region struggling from a lost or stolen sense of identity. Both for Piotrowski and Francis Fukuyama in particular, the end of the Cold War brought with it the possibility for this region to be redefined, it was no

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<sup>66</sup> Piotr Piotrowski. *In the shadow of Yalta: art and the avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*. (London: Reaktion, 2009), 7.

longer part of the Soviet Union and the pre-war alliances/ empires / power structures were no longer existent. However, 30 years after the fall of the wall this region is still struggling with the identity stain that lives on through the legacy of the Cold War.

Francis Fukuyama in his book: *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*, argues that Identity politics have turned into the threat of liberal democracy. He states in his preface how “Hungary had been one of the first countries in Eastern Europe to overthrow its Communist regime. When it entered both NATO and the European Union, it appeared to have rejoined Europe as what political scientists characterized as a “consolidated” liberal democracy.”<sup>67</sup> Now, with the Orbán government in place, it seems as though the country is headed the opposite way, much of the reason being this struggle for a national identity. As has been previously discussed, this *Grey Zone* seems to have been in a fluctuating sense of identity for the good part of 300 years. Fukuyama however has not taken into account the perplex history of East-Central Europe. The *Grey Zone* as discussed earlier has had a complicated history especially related to, as he calls it: ‘the struggle for recognition’. Even though Hungary is part of the European Union, the nation state obviously cannot relate to the European family.

Fukuyama believes that the contemporary identity politics have arisen due to a need for recognition but also due to the blurring of the line between the political left and right. In his chapter, *From Identity to Identities*, Fukuyama argues that the student protests of 1968 (which happened both in Western and Eastern Europe) were not a movement purely based on class struggle but more on the recognition of marginalized groups. These movements arose so that democracies would recognize the rights of all citizens equally. Fukuyama claims however that “democracies never live up to this pretension: people are often not judged on their individual character and abilities, whatever the law says, but assumptions of them as members of groups.”<sup>68</sup> A parallel can be drawn that brings the struggle of East-Central Europe to the forefront. Stuck between two fronts, it is either identified as ‘Eastern’ generally associated to/ with otherness and backwardness, yet most of the countries in the region are full members of the European Union – stereotypically associated with civilized societies/ modernity.

Fukuyama explains how both the political left and right have started pivoting on issues related to identity politics. It used to be the case that the main political struggle was structured around liberty and equality – it seems to have shifted to immigration and identity. Whereas it

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<sup>67</sup> Francis Fukuyama. *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018, xi.

<sup>68</sup> Fukuyama, 106.

used to be the case that the Left ensured an equal opportunity society and the Right ensured individual and economic freedoms, the roles of the political poles have been reversed. The right is more centered on issues regarding national identity also known as ‘nationalism’, as can be seen through the example of Hungary. The left is more concerned with individual and minority group rights, such as the LGBTQ+, black rights, women’s rights etc. This phenomenon can be translated onto the contemporary map of Europe where one can observe that the rise of nationalism and Right-wing politics are more prevalent in the East (who are struggling to form an identity/ to be recognized) and more Leftist politics in the West of Europe, which are no more focused on the equality of minority groups.

It is difficult to talk about the *Grey Zone* in terms of postcolonial theory. This is because East Central Europe was never really a colony of the ‘Western powers’. Parts of East Central Europe had previously been important centers of empires, such as Budapest, part of the Austro-Hungarian empire and Prague, the capital of the Hapsburg Empire. To some extent it can be claimed that East Central Europe was colonized by the Soviet Empire. As Kuus claims, “[t]oday, the power to frame East-Central Europe in a particular way and make that framing stick lies not with Russia but with Western institutions.”<sup>69</sup> The power to shape the identity of East-Central Europe lies mostly within the EU institutions, however this prevailing duality persists and makes it ever more complicated to reach a conclusion about the socio-political position of this region. It seems as though the expansion of the EU to the East entertains aspects of colonialism.

Merje Kuus, discusses the multiple identities within Europe’s internal East. She explains how the concept of Central Europe was one that emerged in the 1980s through dissidents of the countries into West, i.e. the now Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. This was an effort to distinguish themselves from Eastern Europe. “The differentiation of Central from Eastern Europe is made in terms of the moral superiority of the civilized Central Europe over the less civilized Russia. Central Europe, like Eastern Europe and Europe, is therefore not a place but an intellectual and political project that functions to pass alterity further east.”<sup>70</sup> Therefore, this can be seen as an attempt of re-identification. That been said, the legacy of the USSR is still very much alive in *the Grey Zone* and its identity, “central Europe requires the East in order to be, it cannot simply escape it.”<sup>71</sup> The issue becomes ever more pressing as the

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<sup>69</sup> Kuus, 483.

<sup>70</sup> Kuus, 480.

<sup>71</sup> Kuus, 481.

identity of this region is dependent on the identity of its ‘colonizers’ – either Russia or the EU – the *Grey Zone* does not have an identity of its own.

The Western region of the European Union boasts a certain shared sense of identity and principles, something that is not necessarily shared neither amongst the individual countries of East Central Europe neither between the West and the general East side of Europe. The reason why the term Eastern European is not fitting as a label for this region is also part of the identity related problem connected to it. The collective term: Eastern Europe, connotes a shared identity of common ideologies, values, culture etc– one that resembles that of Western Europe. However, that is not the case, as “[t]he various countries and nations of this broadly defined Eastern Europe do not relate to one another; instead, they tend to relate to other cultures and regions: parts of former Yugoslavia to Mediterranean culture; The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, to the history of the Austrian Empire, the Baltic countries to Scandinavia; and the Southern Balkans to the Near East.”<sup>72</sup>

Edouard Glissant argues for the right of opacity; opacity in the sense of an opaque identity. He questions why we are so prone to evaluating people on a scale of how transparent or accustomed they are to ideas proposed by the West. Transparency for Glissant is the prerequisite for ‘Otherness’, letting another culture dominate yours.<sup>73</sup> In the case of the Eastern-Central Europe, following Glissant’s reasoning, it is clear how the region is suffering from a lack of opaqueness. East Central Europe has been subject to other states’ influences, going back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and more recently the USSR and the EU. This region is trapped between the West and the East but it is considered neither really Western nor Eastern.

Fukuyama explains how “national identity begins with a shared belief in the legitimacy of the country’s political system, whether that system is democratic or not. But national identity also extends into the realm of culture and values. It consists of the stories that people tell about themselves: where they come from, what they celebrate, their shared historical memories, what it takes to become a genuine member of the community.”<sup>74</sup> Even after the end of the Cold War and the ascension of many previously soviet countries into the European Union, the problem of a shared identity remains a pressing issue. What brings many of the Eastern European countries together is their shared history of Communism, however that is something none of them want to be associated to and therefore look for an alternative identity in the EU or with their pre-cold-war identities. For some reason, this seems to be dividing Europe more than

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<sup>72</sup> Hoptman, Laura J., & Tomáš Pospiszyl, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of relation*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

<sup>74</sup> Fukuyama, 126.

bringing it together through the rise of right-wing extremist politics in pursuit of more distinct and individual national identities rather than collective EU identities. These political attitudes are also ones that overflow into the art historical field, also possibly influencing our judgment and perception of East (Central) European art.

## **2.2 Conclusion**

The discussion of the Nylon Curtain is very much linked to that of identity politics and transferring of ideas and concepts portrayed by Works and Words. For a long time it was perceived that the West and the East were two completely different worlds during but also after the Cold War. As has been shown, not only were there trends that developed in parallel such as the revolts of 1968 and the art scene in particular, but there was the will and curiosity for intercultural exploration between the West and the East – with the Works and Words being obvious proof of such phenomena. Instead of focusing on the differences i.e. capitalism vs. communism, one should also focus on the similarities between the two regions. After all, the 1970s were the highpoint of post-modernism. Postmodernism, as a theory is defined by a focus on multiplicity and plurality. Whereas the history of modernism is characterized by its exclusionist and conservative nature, postmodernism formed a response to break free from such ideological models and in the effort to become more inclusive and accepting of diversity. In many respects, however, the East – (central) European region remained forgotten.

Identity politics make us look at and acquire prejudices about individuals and bigger groups as well – such as artists groups, minority groups and nation states and entire regions – and East-Central Europe has been stained with a label it feels does not represent it accordingly. Fukuyama and Piotrowski, consider the liminal point in which East-Central Europe finds itself today, an opportunity to reshape and redefine its identity, however this region has been in this state for 30 years. Even though most of the East-Central European countries are full members of the European Union, as Kuus explains, they are still marginalized within Europe as well.

Culturally, these states don’t want to be associated with each other, there is no sense of unity amongst them. Nearly in a way to avoid keeping the legacy of “Eastern Europe” alive. These states and societies have idealized Western Europe and have submerged themselves into a power relationship with the West being in control and the pre-eastern bloc looking up to the societies and principles of the countries that were on the Western side of the Wall. This phenomenon also flowed into the art world and definitely influenced the production of art but also the development of the art history of the region. The transparent attitude these countries have towards Western Europe has definitely influenced their sense of identity but also in how

art developed. This chapter, other than portraying a large spectrum of ideas on what being East Central European is, it emphasizes that it remains quite vague – because it is. Until the identity situation of this region has been resolved, to the eyes of the Western viewer, East-Central Europe is to some extent, still exotic. For the purpose of this thesis, the focus will be shifted onto how the art scene evolved in this complex international political system in order to contextualize the atmosphere in which the Works and Words international art manifestation took place in.

## **CHAPTER III: Is Art History in Eastern – Central Europe Possible? Defining the Artistic Grey Zone and Conceptual art.**

East-Central Europe is a (socio-political) region that has come into existence very recently – after World War II - and since then it has been in a constant phase of fluctuation. The nations this region was primarily split into, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia were countries that previously did not exist with the borders they were given after the Treaty of Yalta. They are countries that no longer exist in the same way in contemporary Europe either, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia especially have been split into a multitude of new states. Additionally, most of these states have now become members of a larger union, The European Union. However, as previously discussed, even though they are members states of the European Union that does not automatically make them ‘Western’. East Central Europe, put bluntly, currently belongs to a historical and social ‘Otherness’.

There is a plethora of reasons behind the historical and art historical marginalization of this region. The largest shift that affected the attitude towards this region culturally, historically and art historically has been the Cold War. Why is it that prior to the Cold War, Eastern European artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Marc Chagall and László Moholy-Nagy were never associated to their nationalities but rather to their artistic merit and were not necessarily labelled as ‘Eastern Europeans’? Yet they were pivotal to the development of the ‘canon’. After the Cold War, the art produced in this region was regarded in a completely different way. Before the Cold War, these countries and their cities may have been considered more European than they are now such as Prague and Budapest, many East Central, and Eastern European artists were included in the canonised narrative, but now artists from that region are hardly ever mentioned and appear as mere footnotes when discussing Russian Avant Garde art. A difficulty seems to persist when attempting to write the art history of this region and holding exhibitions, such as *Works and Words*, as it is no longer considered part of the Western canon, it is not considered Soviet art and it is also not possible to create an over-arching Art history of East Central Europe for reasons related to representation and local cultural. What is to be done with the Art History of East Central Europe, can one write a history of this region?

### 3.1 The Art Historical Grey Zone

The term *grey zone*, as described in the introduction, is a term that incorporates issues of a region struggling from a lost or misrepresented sense of identity and of an unshared history. Looking at this region art historically one notices similar patterns to those of its socio-political history – the overlooking of the region and its categorization into a specific field of ‘Otherness’ or as described by Piotrowski as ‘close Others’. This ‘close Otherness’ is a state of being close to the West but ‘not enough’ to be part of the Western canon. In contrast to Western European art and Soviet art, the East-Central European art scene has yet to be explored in detail. As Piotrowski claims, “This is especially true with respect to the art produced in the region after 1945. By contrast, the earlier period has been subject of several important studies.”<sup>75</sup> After the War the region of East-Central Europe became a homogenized area, as Piotrowski describes it: “The Eastern Bloc was characterized by an all-pervasive sameness” to the eyes of a Western European. This constitutes the first major obstacle when writing about the history of this region – when departing from the idea that this region can be grouped in the same way as Western Europe, one is off to a wrong start.

The ‘Otherness’ that East-Central Europe was placed into, also art historically, for many of Piotrowski’s contemporaries and colleagues “was synonymous with being ‘not-quite-as-good’ as the West.”<sup>76</sup> Many art critics and historians of East Central Europe were concerned with how to get their country’s art into the Western canon. Instead of challenging the structures of the canon that were keeping the art produced in this region of the world marginalized, they purely wished to adapt to its standards.<sup>77</sup> This statement directly links back the letter of Goran Đorđević<sup>78</sup>, claiming that an invitation to participate in a Western exhibition, no matter how culturally degrading it may have been, was something young Eastern European artists would subject themselves to. They would do this for a shot in making it into the Western art world. This issue mirrors the identity struggle discussed in the previous chapter, as the East Central

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<sup>75</sup> Piotrowski, *Shadow of Yalta*, 8.

<sup>76</sup> Piotrowski, *Shadow of Yalta*, 12.

<sup>77</sup> Piotr Piotrowski. “Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde”, in *Europa! Europa?*. (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2009), 57. “The cultures of particular regions (the Balkans, Eastern Europe, Scandinavia) looked up to the West, and not at one another. They drew information about each other predominantly from the West, and not from other margins. The same is true for individual national art historical narratives in specific regions, even regions as small as Central Europe. Poles generally have almost no idea about the history of Romanian art – they ignore it out of a superiority complex on behalf of their own culture, which they prefer to compare directly to the West. Similarly, Czechs on average know little, if nothing, about the history of Ukrainian art. The Other, or – again – the “close Other” looks up to the Master, and not at “An-Other”, accepting – often quite unconsciously – the hierarchy of the center to which it has fallen victim.”

<sup>78</sup> See Figure 1 a-b.

European countries are subjecting themselves to cultural transparency as described by Edouard Glissant. Glissant would say that “there is a basic injustice in the worldwide spread of transparency and the projection of Western thought. Why must we evaluate people on the scale of the transparency of ideas proposed by the West? As far as I am concerned a person has the right to be opaque.”<sup>79</sup> Therefore submerging themselves into a pattern of wanting to resemble Western trends and traditions, could account for part of the reason of this contemporary identity struggle.

Part of the reason why the artistic scene in East-Central Europe developed in such a way is to a certain extent the result of the binarism of post-war politics. Even though Eastern European artists did in some occasions, partake in exhibitions in the West, such as the IAM international manifestation in Warsaw in 1978, the Works and Words in Amsterdam in 1979 and Europa Europa in 1994, the exhibitions were mostly focused on showcasing art from East-Central Europe, more in the exotic sense, rather than exhibiting it *with* and as *part of* the ‘canonical’ artists. “The center (West) provides canons, hierarchy of values, and stylistic norms – it is the role of the periphery (in this case East Central Europe) to adopt them in a process of reception. It may happen, of course, that the periphery has its own outstanding artists, but their recognition, or art historical consecration, depends on the center: on exhibitions organized in the West and books published in Western countries.”<sup>80</sup> By subjecting themselves to the West, they set back their own identities and independence.

Both the Western academics and institutions had a biased view towards the art produced in the East, partly due to the Cold-War sentiment that in many cases made people and society question anything produced in the east side of the Wall, but also because art in East-Central Europe was not as accessible due to the stringent censorship state policies that made it hard for artists to express themselves freely.<sup>81</sup> This greatly affected and suppressed the development of artistic expression in comparison to Western Europe as exemplified through the research trips the De Appel team made to East Central Europe in 1979. An example of this would be that many scholars, authors, critics etc. were forced to censor their texts in order to even be considered for publishing.<sup>82</sup> In this respect, most of the interesting and relevant art historical writings were not those made by scholars and critics but by the artists themselves who did not necessarily feel the need to publish. Eastern (Central) Europe is not known and is rarely studied

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<sup>79</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of relation*, (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189.

<sup>80</sup> Piotrowski, “Towards a Horizontal History”, 50.

<sup>81</sup> Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 9.

<sup>82</sup> Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 9

for its cultural production during the cold war – which should by no means suggest that it is of no relevance or of comparable quality to what was being produced in the West – it has just been harder to access, due to political obstacles but also due to language barriers.

From May 8<sup>th</sup> 1979 to April 8<sup>th</sup> 1980, Gerhard von Graevenitz and Norman Dilworth organized the ‘PIER+OCEAN’ exhibition about ‘Construction in the Art of the Seventies’ first shown in London and then in the Kroller-Muller Museum in The Netherlands. The idea of this exhibition in the beginning was to create a historical retrospect of constructivism which soon proved impossible to do. In end it sought to “mirror aspects of the construction as they are reflected in the art of the 70s: reflections of the construction of the pier in the ocean as seen from the pier.”<sup>83</sup> Artists such as Ed Ruscha, Sol LeWitt, Mario Merz, Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra were part of this exhibition. Among these artists, Von Graevenitz also decided to invite Ryszard Waśko, a Polish conceptual artist. This was a rare occasion where an artist from the East was invited to participate in an exhibition with the so-called canonical artists of conceptual art.

From a personal account, found in the Archive of Contemporary Thought, founded by Waśko himself, he describes his experience of this exhibition as follows:

*"I had different feelings about this exhibition. On one hand I was impressed watching for the first time, such a full and comprehensive presentation of the most important ideas, artistic attitudes and pieces that had come into existence in the art world since the end of the 60's, through the 70's. And of course, it was great to be invited to take part in this exhibition because I felt connected to this movement. The show kind of made me think, naturally, that it was too bad there had been no chance to organize such an event in Poland so far. I felt it as a big loss. On the other hand, though, the exhibition seemed quite dead because of its dry, museum-style presentation of the objects, taken out of the life and context in which they were created. In other words, the 'process' of creating itself - which was often perceived in the 70's as a subject, a piece of art - was left out in the London show. Therefore this exhibition lost its power. In my opinion, a lack of an aspect of 'process' was a weakness of it. After that, the idea for the title CONSTRUCTION IN PROCESS, for an event in Lodz, came to my mind. I tried to emphasize the importance of two important aspects of art of the 70's, so that the sense of the word 'process' would be understood in its broad meaning and context."<sup>84</sup>*

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<sup>83</sup> Gerhard von Graevenitz, Introduction in *PIER+OCEAN*. Arts Council Publications, London. 1980, 6

<sup>84</sup> Ryszard Waśko, "Construction In Process". *Wschodnia.Pl.* (2019).  
<http://www.wschodnia.pl/Konstrukcja/html/construction.htm>.

As a response to this exhibition Waśko, organized the ‘Construction in Process’ exhibition in Lodz, Poland in 1981. The invitation was sent out even before the Pier+Ocean exhibition premiered, in April 1980. According to the invitation, this was meant to be a retrospective exhibition in which fifty artists, “who according to the organizers, have produced the most relevant achievements in art in the 70s.”<sup>85</sup> The submission of the art works was left open ended. Many of the artists that ended up participating in this exhibition could to some extent be considered the ‘canonical artists’ of East-Central Europe – however that is not really a claim that can be made. Artists included (amongst others) were: Tomasz Konart, Dóra Mauer, Józef Robakowski, Antoni Mikołajczyk, Paweł Kwik, but also quite a lot of Dutch artists (also in participants of 1979: Works and Words), Servie Janssen, Gerhard von Graevenitz, Jan Dibbets and Americans: Richard Serra, Ed Ruscha, Sol LeWitt and Les Levine. In many respects, this was a much more forward thinking and inclusive exhibition than the one organized by von Graevenitz in London and the Netherlands.

This is relevant because it shows how at least this exhibition organized in East Central Europe was a lot more inclusive, global art history oriented and forwarding thinking than the PIER+OCEAN exhibition in London. In fact, Waśko was already able to identify and acknowledge the formal and aesthetical similarities between the artists from the apparently opaque Iron Curtain. Even though Gerhard von Graevenitz was a major contributor to the preparation and execution of the Works and Words project, in preparing the PIER+OCEAN exhibition he completely left out all the East-Central European artists that were included by Waśko and that were clearly relevant.

This is to show that Works and Words was indeed a rare occasion and that exhibitions of its sort were not as common in the West. Through both Works and Words and the ‘Construction in Process exhibition’ one sees the beginning of what Piotrowski would characterize as ‘a provincialization of the center’ which “discloses the fact that cultural metropolises within a hierarchically-defined art geography may possess political, economic, and epistemic power, but they, too, are rooted in specific contexts, very much like any other location. Experiences and patterns observed there are particular as well and, hence, should have no stronger claim for general validity as processes unfolding at the margins.”<sup>86</sup> The overlap between these two exhibitions is more about their method of bringing art and artists together

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<sup>85</sup> Peter Downsborough, Richard Nonas, Fred Sandback. (eds.), *Construction in Process: Oct 26 – Nov 15 1981 Lodz Poland* (New York: Thousand Secretaries Press), 2.

<sup>86</sup> Hock, 3.

rather than anything else – something that seemed to be more advanced in the assumingly backwards East than in the West.

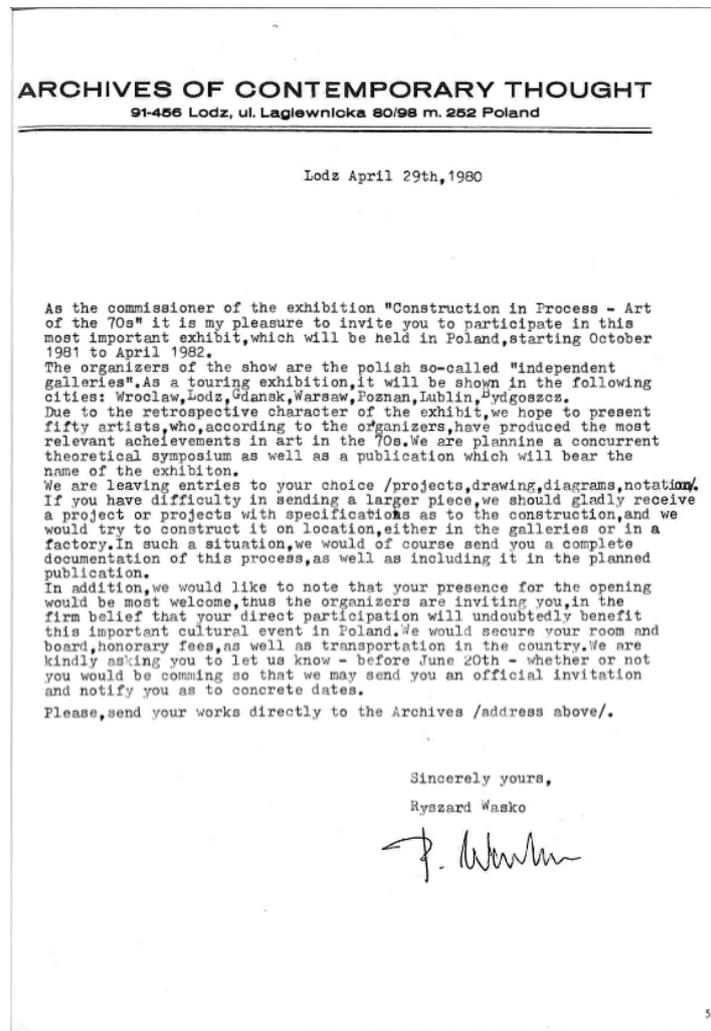


Figure 4: Invitation to "Construction in Process - Art of the 70s". De Appel.

In an essay about the 'Construction in Process' exhibition in Lodz, Andrzej Bonarski, has spelled out the contemporary situation in Poland very clearly. He says: "As we all know, in recent years Poland has been struggling; too much and too little money at the same time. Too little, decidedly too little for people to live in a happy, healthy, self-respecting way, too little also for science and culture; it is not impossible to guess for what money was not lacking. It was lacking for art, the avant-garde especially. And it needs to be explained – especially for those disgusted by the hideousness of the West – that man of culture, the man of art in Poland (as in other Eastern European countries) gets practically all its money through agencies run by

the government or completely controlled by it.”<sup>87</sup> It is needless to say that this exhibition was privately funded by Waško and all the artists that ended did so on their own dime.<sup>88</sup>

In many cases, the way art and art history had functioned and circulated changed drastically in East Central Europe, in comparison to how it functioned before the war. Artists could no longer create and exhibit what they wanted in an official setting, and art historians and critics could no longer express themselves in a way that represented their authentic subjectivity. “Contact with Western art was suppressed, and efforts to organize progressive exhibitions were rejected if not criminalized. Young people were denied access to art schools, not on the basis of their talent but according to their political profile; art magazines were under constant censorship; and museums and galleries showed only those artists whose work was sympathetic to the official politics of the time.”<sup>89</sup> As a result to these measures, one saw the development of the underground scene, which is the one that is relevant to this thesis. As Tomáš Pospiszył explains: “a complex network of alternative avenues of distribution and operation, which included self-published books and private exhibitions and concerts, was established, built directly on a tradition developed during World War II and earlier in reaction to a history of repressive regimes in the region that had existed for decades in various forms.”<sup>90</sup> As the non-state controlled art movements developed in a way that also made it hard for the state to define and censor them. For a very long time, both the ‘free’ art and its history remained underground. For this reason, it is also hard and invalid to talk about the ‘art history of East-Central Europe’ – each country’s art scene, even though it was under the same sort of soviet repression, developed differently. Since each country’s art scene developed parallel and not in conjunction with each other, how is it then possible to write an overarching art history or narrative of East-Central Europe?

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<sup>87</sup> Andrzej Bonarski. *Essay*, in Peter Downsborough, Richard Nonas, Fred Sandback. (eds.), *Construction in Process – Oct 26- Nov 15 1981 Lodz Poland*, (New York: Thousand Secretaries Press 1982), 66.

<sup>88</sup> Bonarski: 66. “Meanwhile, somehow, as if by an unbelievable miracle, a little bit by his [Waško,] own money, a little bit without even that, for a good word, for good will, a drink with the right person at the right time, Waško, organized an exhibition which wouldn’t have shamed any institution or foundation, even the richest. He [Waško,] attracted almost anyone he wanted to Lodz. He had them in the unbelievably beautiful building that he had got as a peculiar souvenir from the Lodz branch of Solidarity. If the expression ‘working class’ wasn’t so boringly overused in Poland, I would have written that the building was a contribution from the leaders of the Lodz working class to our international account of newest art.”

<sup>89</sup> Hoptman & Pospiszył, 13.

<sup>90</sup> Hoptman & Pospiszył, 13.

### 3.2 Is there an East-Central European Art History?

Since the 1960s, characterized by their pluralistic and post-modern nature, the art historical canon has undergone vast criticism, through feminism, marxism, gender studies etc. however, “many scholars and curators, including some who recognize the inherently reactionary nature of the canon and the problems it raises, hold the view that abolishing the canon is not feasible but also problematic.”<sup>91</sup> Rather than abolishing the canon, which in the present-day art history entails or gives “the impression of a closed system, as is in the case of the canon of sacred texts, the bible”<sup>92</sup> Ruth Iskin argues for a pluriversal canon. The term pluriversal is borrowed, in this case, from the Latin American scholar, Walter D. Mignolo who uses this term to counter universalization.<sup>93</sup> Countering universalization means that something that happened locally, in this case in the West art and art history does not necessarily apply to the rest of the world. Thus instead of creating a universal canon that includes all art history, what Iskin proposes is Pluriversal Canons. As will be discussed, for East Central European art, a singular narrative is not an option and a single pluriversal canon/ narrative would mimic the character of the Western canon and the limitation it is accompanied with. What is necessary in this case is pluriversal canons.

The terms Western and Eastern European, whether consciously or unconsciously have been stained with the legacy of the Cold War. As Piotrowski states, “what differentiates postwar Western and East European art is of course their respective ideological contexts. So-called Western, liberal, democratic ideology appeared to produce an opportunity for pluralistic, heterogenous art (and art history), while in the East the stereotypical view of art, based on a uniform ideological background, seems to suggest a more homogenous image of art and its history.”<sup>94</sup> In his article, *How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?* Piotrowski claims that in fact East European art and art history may in fact be even more heterogenous than that of the West. Even though all the East Central European countries were all adherent to the Soviet ideology, each state implemented cultural policies differently, which

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<sup>91</sup> Ruth E. Iskin, ed. *Re-envisioning the contemporary art canon: Perspectives in a global world*. Taylor & Francis, 2016, 8.

<sup>92</sup> Iskin, 23.

<sup>93</sup> Iskin, 23.

<sup>94</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, "How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?." *Third Text* 23, no. 1 (2009), 5.

consequently resulted in “different meanings of comparable art in parallel historical moments in the region.”<sup>95</sup>

In trying to explain the limitations of writing about ‘East-Central European’ art histories, Piotrowski asserts that the art history of this region developed independently in each country, the “discourses were parallel, and at least until now almost never overlapped.”<sup>96</sup> It seems as though one of the things most of these Soviet states shared was a Soviet dependence but also a feeling of unrelatability towards each other and the Soviet Union. The chances for artistic exchange were bigger between each individual state and Western Europe rather than an inter-East Central European exchange. He explains this phenomenon as a “subconscious resistance to the official propaganda of some specific identity for the Eastern bloc as a whole, and a claustrophobic complex of isolation of that part of the continent from the ‘true’ sources of culture, that is, the West.”<sup>97</sup>

Taking the specific case of Czechoslovakia, as a country and not the broader region of Eastern-Central Europe, already proves difficult to write about. In writing about *The Present Czechoslovakian Art Situation* (1979), the theoretician Jaroslav Andel points out the striking differences between Czech and Slovak conceptual photography, at a time when Czechoslovakia was a unified state. Photography played a different role in Slovakia than it did in Bohemia. In the latter, photography was “successively incorporated in projects/ executed as graphics” where as in the former it had more of a documentary role.<sup>98</sup> Whereas Bohemia seemed to be influenced by happening and land art, Slovakia had taken French Nouveau Realisme and Pop art as a point of reference, therefore the result was completely different in both cases.<sup>99</sup>

When it comes to how the narrative in each country was developed, it was similar to the Western narrative yet “Eastern Europe has never simply reflected the stylistic narrative of art in the West, and in its artistic practice never accepted the paradigmatic stylistics of specific trends of modern art. The model of a history of modernism defined in terms of style has always been translated into heterogeneous mutations, both at the beginning of the twentieth century and later.”<sup>100</sup> In this respect it can be said that the movements in East Central Europe may have

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<sup>95</sup> Piotrowski, 5.

<sup>96</sup> Piotrowski, 7.

<sup>97</sup> Piotrowski, 7.

<sup>98</sup> Jaroslav Andel, “The Present Czechoslovakian Art Situation, 70.

<sup>99</sup> Andel: 70.

<sup>100</sup> Piotrowski, “How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?.”, 6.

carried similar labels and formalistically resembled those of the Western canon but were always understood slightly different from how they were understood in the West.

In an effort to create an Eastern European art historical narrative post 1945, Laura Hoptman, and Tomáš Pospiszyl co-edited and published in collaboration with the MOMA series, the *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since 1950*. Even though their motivation for assembling and publishing this book is legitimate, the way in which they executed this publication may not have been the most appropriate. In their motivation they state that: “We hope that this book will serve as a general introduction for American and other English-speaking readers to major figures in the artistic and the critical realm. [...] Our criteria for inclusion were straightforward: we chose landmark texts that labeled movements, challenged received ideas, and changed the way art was made and thought about by influential writers respected in their communities and nationally.[...] With our focus on primary source material, we have, for the most part, avoided retrospective regional assessments, monographs and art-historical chronologies.”<sup>101</sup> Hoptman and Pospiszyl have replicated a ‘Western-style-canon’ and adjusted it to the East (Central) European region. In their effort to include their history in the standardized art historical canon, they fell into the trap of what Iskin would call consensus. In effect, Hoptman and Pospiszyl created a mirror narrative of the same narrative they have been so critical of.

Another example of such an attempt to write about the history of East Central European art, which could already be considered a step ahead of what Hoptman and Pospiszyl proposed is that of *Globalizing East European Art Histories* edited by Beáta Hock and published in 2018. This edited collection offers different transnational perspectives on the regional and national histories of the isolated East Central European region. The aim of this book is to try to restore the ways in which it is evident that East-Central European art has been entangled with different actors and institutions from earlier periods in history until today. The way this book is put together respects and acknowledges the cultural sensitivities of the East Central European region and tries to offer a more comprehensive account - from a local and not universalized perspective. In more detail: “we do not bring together countries and nations in this book on the basis of their assumed cultural similarity, specificity, or “otherness” from known models—hence, we also have little interest in operating with otherwise popular thought patterns (like “regional specificity” or “Eastern European collective identity”). Rather, we see the region as an imbricated and heterogeneous field that nevertheless shares historical characteristics that do

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<sup>101</sup> Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 10.

warrant the use of the term and concept “East-Central Europe” or “Eastern Europe.” The common denominator that we might wish to propose is a historically shared geopolitical and epistemic position, intimately linked to the region’s location at the margins of the European core and the concomitant exposure to “epistemic violence,” which we now aspire to turn into an “epistemic privilege.”<sup>102</sup>

Therefore, instead of trying to achieve an overall and overarching representation of the most influencing artists in this region, this edition tries to showcase this the art of this region on the basis of a globalized perspective. The focus is mostly based on exploring different methodologies to approach this region rather than to describe it, as is dictated by the more the conservative art historical methodology. Therefore, East Central Europe is set and explored within a network of transnational encounters and how both art from this region was influenced and how it influenced the network it was circulating in.

All in all, it can be said that in order to write an art history of East Central European art, in which it is adequately represented is still under exploration. There have been many attempts which have all paved the way to discover new methodologies and syntheses which adequately explore rather than describe local histories within their globalized heterogenous world network. The case for East Central Europe is one that has still remained vague to a certain extent but, is definitely one that is increasingly acknowledged and worked upon.

### **3.3 Conceptual Art in East (Central) Europe: A Camouflage Method.**

Conceptual art has been one of the most international art movements also relevant to this thesis, as it has transgressed borders in all directions of the world, North America, Latin America, Europe (East and West). Even though, as has been the case with history, East Central Europe – *The Grey Zone* – has been forgotten but it has proven to be an important origin of different types of conceptualism.<sup>103</sup> For East Central European artists, conceptualism was of great importance and relevance as they realized “that by shifting their focus away from the object, they could free themselves not only from traditional artistic mediums like painting and sculpture, but also from state controlled galleries and museums, while at the same time reaching an audience on a much less mediated and more personal level.”<sup>104</sup> One major difference

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<sup>102</sup> Hock, 7.

<sup>103</sup> Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 123.

<sup>104</sup> Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 123.

between the official state art and that which followed the path of conceptualism was that one sees a change in artistic expression, where the underground art adapted from traditional figurative/ abstract painting to other media such as installation, photography, performance and video and mail art. A reason for this development could have been that the government authorities did not know how to censor this sort of expression, they could not understand or approach it.

As was also the case for Works and Words, many of the artists presented conceptual and experimental work, that was often not understood or welcomed (as was already discussed through Van Droffelaar’s television interview about performance art and the negative critique of Karel Schampers). Conceptualism involves understanding the concept of the object rather than its form. Often Eastern European conceptual art seemed to be camouflaged as a ‘Western object’ but carried with it a completely different conceptual baggage. In preparation for the ‘Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s exhibition (1999), the artist László Beke, who also participated in Works and Words in Amsterdam claims that he wanted to underline the differences between East (Central) European conceptual art and Western European conceptual art, but found it very hard.<sup>105</sup> He claims that he “ was prepared to accept the political version given to us (East Central Europe) by Western politicians—for example, West Germany vs. East Germany, West Berlin vs. East Berlin. To belong to the Eastern part has always meant that one has a little “Minderheitsgefühl” (inferiority complex), mixed with a kind of pride, first and foremost. In Central and Eastern Europe, conceptualism means a disguised political and social engagement.<sup>106</sup> The reason why this is so relevant for Works and Words, is that it shows that what the way in which one views and critiques, in this case conceptual art, from Western Europe is not universally applicable to East Central European art. Conceptual art in Eastern Europe had a different function, it was made in a different context and served a different end-goal to that of Western Europe – a lot more connected to the political freedom of expression. Attempts like the NET manifesto that will be shortly discussed, showed an urge for better communication in the arts between West and East Europe, a goal that was also shared by the organizers of Works and Words.

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<sup>105</sup> László Beke, "László Beke Looks Back: Thoughts On Global Conceptualism." MoMa, September 15 2015, [https://post.at.moma.org/content\\_items/689-laszlo-beke-looks-back-thoughts-on-global-conceptualism](https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/689-laszlo-beke-looks-back-thoughts-on-global-conceptualism)

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

In the Western sense, ‘Conceptual Art’ is a term that initially applied to the work of relatively few artists using language to analyse the problems thrown up by the collapse of modernism and the coincident burgeoning of a range of alternatives to it. Subsequently, in the 1970s Conceptual Art took a political turn [...] The term has since, however, mutated into ‘conceptualism’ – which is now often used by journalists and non-specialist commentators as a catch-all for the gamut of postmodernist activity.”<sup>107</sup> The way in which Perry and Wood describe the term conceptualism is the art that was being produced in after the 1960s, which critiqued the Greenbergian and Friedian perception of art. As argued by Lucy Lippard, Minimal art, was part of a general shift from Modern Art to Conceptual Art. This process had as a result the branching out of art into different media and practices such as installation art, performance art, photography, land art and anti-material art<sup>108</sup>. For László Beke, “Conceptual art emerged in a plurality of genres, forms and variations. Among the numerous manifestations of the movement that extended the strictest/ traditional definition of conceptualism was the German “konzept” the simple verbal or pictorial/ visual representation of a concept that is also typical to Eastern-Europe.”<sup>109</sup> Even though when one tends to connect the term conceptual art to the art of the U.S. and U.K. it actually branched off into different and other related movements such as arte povera or land art and earth art. These movements are (mostly) not directly related to the term of conceptual art according to the Western canon, but nevertheless fit under the umbrella term conceptual art or Global Conceptualism.

To claim, thus, that art created in the West was a-political is inaccurate. Even though conceptual art was a movement that flowed through borders and was in a sense ‘stylistically’ universal, what conceptual meant to Eastern Europeans, as discussed above, differed to what it meant to Western Europeans/ Americans. In the interview series: Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe, published by e-Flux, Boris Groys stated that: “I remember this very well, in regard to people coming from the West in the 1960s. We felt ourselves very close to them aesthetically but not always politically.”<sup>110</sup> Similarly, the Czechoslovak theoretician Jaroslav Andel stated

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<sup>107</sup> Perry, Gillian, and Paul Wood, eds. *Themes in contemporary art*. (Yale University Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>108</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, (University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>109</sup> Laszlo Beke. The present time of the conceptual art: The political Implication of Eastern European Art. *Vivid (Radical) Memory*: 2007, 1.

[http://www.vividradicalmemory.org/htm/workshop/bcn\\_Essays/Present\\_Beke\\_eng.pdf](http://www.vividradicalmemory.org/htm/workshop/bcn_Essays/Present_Beke_eng.pdf)

<sup>110</sup> Zdenka Badovinac, Čufer Eda, Freire Cristina, Groys Boris, Harrison Charles, Havránek Vít, Piotrowski Piotr, and Stipančić Branka. "Conceptual Art And Eastern Europe: Part I". *E- Flux* no. 40 vol 1. (2012). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/40/60277/conceptual-art-and-eastern-europe-part-i/>.

that “the pieces from socialist countries that look similar to the Western ones may have different meanings in their original contexts” and questioned the possibility of whether these different meanings of a similar expression could be further understood through the same (Western) conceptual framework.<sup>111</sup>

To ground this conceptual distinction between the art in the East Central Europe and the Western Europe it could be understood as follows: “In comparison to this Western notion of conceptual art, the Eastern European variant was never so rigorous. Rather, it was flexible and elastic, ironic, humorous, non-professional, communicable, always ready to become a social activity of a group of young people or even an alternative movement... On the other hand, the ‘immaterial’ nature of conceptualist works, and the ‘poorness’ of the media employed – ‘just an idea,’ words and concepts, paper and pencil, typewriter, postcards, a telephone call, ephemeral actions – made communication easier and censorship more difficult. This is why conceptual art had to be invented in Eastern Europe, and its function as a strategy for evading authority should be considered a feature specific to its development in the region”<sup>112</sup> Therefore, conceptual art was not only conceptually different, but many times was used as a tool to counter state censorship – such as mail art. The example of mail art is particularly interesting since it allowed artists to communicate their ideas abroad – in the West – whilst tricking the authorities. This is an instance of intercultural communication from the East to the West, where it shows that there was a will for cross-Wall communication.

The NET manifesto realised by Jarosław Kozłowski and Andrzej Kostołowski in 1971, who were also involved and participated in the Works and Words international manifestation, was a proposal whose aim was to mainly encourage inter East-East exchange but also an East-West exchange. Kozłowski explains that, “Kostołowski and I met very frequently and talked about art a lot, swapped books and so on. The idea of ignoring all the physical barriers and borders which limited contacts was born in a very natural way, as was the idea of using the post to get in contact with various artists around the world.”<sup>113</sup> NET created a network of artists that communicated their ideas by mail, the network started with 350 recipients, and later on

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<sup>111</sup> László Zsuzsa. “Works and Words. The Invention and Renunciation of the Concept of East European Art.” *Institute of The Present*. <https://institutulprezentului.ro/en/2018/11/15/works-and-words-the-invention-and-renunciation-of-the-concept-of-east-european-art/>

<sup>112</sup> Piotrowski, How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?, 6.

<sup>113</sup> Jarosław Kozłowski, J, and Klara Kemp-Welch. "NET, Jarosław Kozłowski in Conversation with Klara Kemp-Welch." *ARTMargins* 1, no. 2–3 (2012), 14-35.

expanded, with no centralized organization.<sup>114</sup> “Kozłowski insists that NET “was never a group” and was, above all, “concerned with dialogues between individuals.” – all artists that were involved were invited to be co-creators of NET.<sup>115</sup>

Through this network of mailing, NET turned into an archive and Kozłowski and Kostołowski started to map out and parallels between artists through their responses via mail. In spite of the different societal differences (on either side of the Wall), Kozłowski and Kostołowski were convinced that Western artists had similar approaches and attitudes to art and society as they had in Poland/ East Central Europe. In Eastern Europe ideology was more related to the system whilst in the West it was more of a critique towards the commercialization of art and society.<sup>116</sup> Essentially, “NET sought to bypass existing art world mechanisms by proposing a field in which artists could distribute their ideas freely.”<sup>117</sup>

Not only is this proposal special because of the idea and goal it entails, but because of how it was realized. “The proposal played with adopting an official aesthetic. Kozłowski reflects that the distinctive blue block lettering of the header “NET,” achieved by carving the letters out of rubber, was part of a strategy designed to dupe censors or controllers at the post office into thinking that the letter had been issued by an officially supported organization of some sort and did not merit closer scrutiny. Their decision to sign the document added to the bureaucratic “look” they sought to cultivate.”<sup>118</sup> This is a good example of how conceptual art was used differently in Eastern Europe because of the societal context vis-à-vis Western conceptualism.

Similarly to Works and Words, this was an attempt to bring artists together in a sort of allegiance in order to promote the creation of a dialogue in which art could escape the ideological borders of politics and the biases that accompanied this separation. Conceptual art is relevant for the discussion of Works and Words as most of the art entailed within it, was conceptual. The fact that the art produced in East Central Europe seemed to have a similar style but a completely different personality or conceptual context, makes it harder to define through the universalist approach of Western art history – yet it remains questionable as to why, if the

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<sup>114</sup> Klara Kemp-Welch, “NET: An Open Proposition”: E-flux Journal. February 2019. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/98/256870/net-an-open-proposition/> . “In defining NET as a decentralized, infinitely reproducible scheme for the transmission of ideas to interested receivers, Kozłowski and Kostołowski offered a pioneering theorization of the alternative network”, 3.

<sup>115</sup> Kemp-Welch, 1

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 3

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 3

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 3

art does indeed look so similar, it is automatically linked to an inferior standard compared to that of the West (as will be discussed in the coming chapter with Works and Words)?

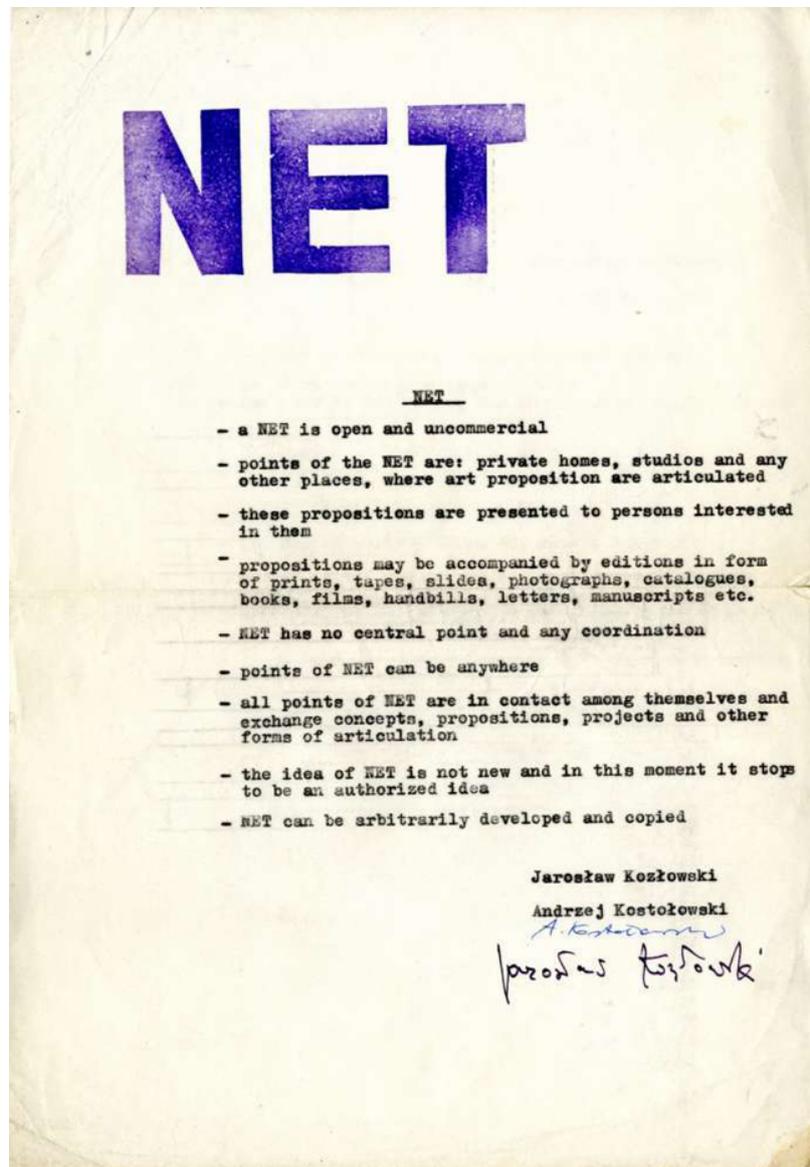


Figure 5. Net Manifestation Jarosław Kozłowski and Andrzej Kostolowski, 1971<sup>119</sup>

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- <sup>119</sup> a NET is open and uncommercial
  - points of the NET are: private homes, studios and any other places, where art propositions are articulated
  - these propositions are presented to persons interested in them
  - propositions may be accompanied by editions in form of prints, tapes, slides, photographs, books, films, handbills, letters, manuscripts etc.
  - NET has no central point and any coordination
  - points of the NET can be anywhere
  - all points of the NET are in contact among themselves and exchange concepts, propositions, projects, and other forms of articulation
  - the idea of NET is not new and in this moment it stops to be an authorized idea
  - NET can be arbitrarily developed and copied

### 3.4 Conclusion

The *Grey Zone* and its art history, let alone the cultural unity and identity of the region, is quite grey indeed. The grey zone cannot really be labelled under the same tag because the connotations accompanied with ‘East’ are negative, yet it can also not officially be called the *Grey Zone*. In fact, this region cannot even be talked about as a region. Taking into account the way in which the art scenes of these countries developed, they did so under the same denominator, but their nominator differed quite extensively. As Piotrowski claims, the only way in which the art worlds of these countries intersect, is that all artists were facing a limitation of their freedom of expression. Each independent country in the *Grey Zone* applied different cultural policies and inter Eastern European may have been more limited than East to West. The will to be more like the West was very prominent for all these societies, which also translated into the art that was being produced, in the non-governmental sphere. In recent years there has been an effort to create a more inclusive ‘canon’, institutions and artists have been trying raise awareness about the art of East-Central Europe with examples such as the international manifestation Works and Words in 1979 in Amsterdam that brought artists from East-Central Europe to the Netherlands to form an equally beneficial artistic dialogue.

Using conceptual art as an example, whose “dimension [...] cannot be grasped without firstly restituting it within the art context of its language system and within that discursive space through which it produces meaning”<sup>120</sup> it is clear that the context, in many cases could not be understood in the West. This could have been for reasons of communication, such as a language barrier, or because of certain presumptions that made one look at art from East-Central Europe differently than that of the West – such as all the politically related bias and propaganda. Needless to say, is that the urge for Eastern artists to be included in the art historical canon was definitely more prominent than that of the West to include this region’s art into the canon.

The way in which art was allowed to develop in East -Central Europe under Soviet rule, left a great impact on the way art history developed. The difficulty in writing an art history of this region has remained an issue that has not been resolved to this day. Many attempts to create a dialogue and to raise awareness of issues relating to representation and labelling, have taken place. Yet 40 years later, this region still remains a *Grey Zone* with no real foot in the canon of

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<sup>120</sup> Claude Gintz. L’Art conceptual, une perspective: Notes on an Exhibition Project in L’Art conceptual, une perspective. Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. 1990, 23.

art history. Why is this issue of an ‘Other’ Europe and an ‘other’ narrative still visible even after the end of the Cold War, why is there not a former Western Europe but only a Former Eastern bloc?

## **CHAPTER IV: AESTHETICS AND IDENTITY POLITICS**

For more than half a century, globalization has undertaken most aspects of societies around the world, including that of the art world. Since the period of postmodernism in the late 60s and early 70s, which was characterized by a theoretically open and pluralistic view of the world, together with the outbreak of globalization, we have been forced to change how we perceive events and phenomena around us. More specifically, aesthetics and identity politics are very much connected to the trend of globalization in the art world. The pool of what can be included in the ‘canon’ has expanded and therefore also has the criteria that determines this ‘admission’. The western concept and theory of aesthetics may no longer be applicable to a postmodern or contemporary art work for reasons ranging from purely technical and materialistic factors to ideological and cultural ones. The problem however begins with the fact that even though such a turn has taken place in the art world, for many, the criteria in which to look and appreciate art, our aesthetic perception, may have remained stagnant (to a 19<sup>th</sup> century or modernism state of mind) not allowing for the appropriate approach and understanding when it comes to dealing with art and culture of our time.

In the same sense, one can say the same about individual identities. They are not what they used to be in precolonial and colonial times; identities nowadays are much more complex due to migration and globalization. Identity politics, when related to the art world, (the artists and their origin) have been called into inspection because it is very often the case that identity politics have interfered in the process of appreciating a work of art or an exhibition – which has also been the case for Works and Words. It has reportedly, very often, been the case that the work of a non-Western artist has been evaluated on the basis of the artist’s cultural and national background. This is problematic because it brings national borders back into discussion when the goal is to move away from them.

By pinpointing these issues, the overarching issue of this chapter questions the binary way in which we look at art and more specifically art from East-Central Europe vis à vis

Western Europe/USA. This chapter will focus on a case study, specifically related to Works and Words to define this issue more visually rather than theoretically. How could one approach a work of art in the so-called global contemporary art world and recognize the conceptual and aesthetic potential of the individual works of art instead of basing one’s judgment on the geographical and cultural origin of the artist? The *status quo* of ‘artistic progression’ does not necessarily have to root from European and North American art traditions; the individual work of art should be evaluated on the basis of its own qualities and context.

#### 4.1 Art History and Aesthetics

Braco Dimitrijevic claims that art history is written and presented in a successive and progressive manner of styles, in which the later style is inherently better than the one before it. Therefore art is historically presented in a way that seems as if it fulfilling a pre-determined path of amelioration. He claims that this concept and way of writing about art history is based on two idealistic presumptions: “1) The idea of continuous amelioration of forms, change of one art form for another, supposedly a better one, presupposing the Hegelian idea that there exists a certain model into which the whole process leads. In other words if Baroque is more perfect than renaissance, or colour field than abstract expressionism, then there is supposed to exist one absolute ideal style to which the whole process of perfection aims; 2) The whole process occurs by merit of genius, or by creators of style who, independently of the socio-historical circumstances in which they live, infuse their masterpieces with divine inspiration.”<sup>121</sup> It is therefore not difficult to imagine that the history of art, presented in such a way has had oppressive consequences due to the very stringent criteria for the inclusion of art into the dominant narrative of art history.

“This model of art history” he asserts “is only a reflection of a general history because it reflects the ideas of Western man about his own history as a series of changes which through conflicts and struggles nevertheless result in so-called progress.”<sup>122</sup>

The way aesthetics tie in with ‘traditional’ art history (art history until the end of modernism) not only greatly limits art to the West but it also limits it to a certain type of artistic production – therefore why many people often question the cultural and artistic value of

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<sup>121</sup> Braco Dimitrijevic, “The Ethics of Form or Aesthetics Logic: Art History as the History of Formal Evolution.” in Hoptman, Laura J., and Tomáš Pospiszyl (eds.) *Primary Documents: a sourcebook for eastern and central european art since the 1950s* (The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 141.

<sup>122</sup> Braco Dimitrijevic, 141.

contemporary artistic expressions such as photography, installation art, performance art, environmental art and so on. This has as an effect (and in many cases) the possible incomprehensibility of contemporary art. Related to the second point of Dimitrijevic, Yuriko Saito explains that ‘paradigmatic western art objects are what western societies tie with aesthetic value.’<sup>123</sup> What Saito means with these, is objects by artists such as Rembrandt, Da Vinci, Michelangelo etc. - all the celebrated western ‘genius’ artists. These art objects are used as the status quo “to determine how far and in what way the familiar notion of art should be stretched.”<sup>124</sup> This definition by nature, predetermines a certain power relationship between art that is made in the West and art that is made elsewhere and art that fulfils certain criteria in contrast to other types of contemporary artistic expression as previously discussed.

Aesthetics are quite a complicated notion; in a way they are both connected to notions of ‘the beautiful’ but they also carry with them a lot of political and societal baggage. The aesthetic experience, in definition, was, and is not meant to be, enjoyed individually, but in a group. What is aesthetically pleasing must be pleasing to a community - or as Kant and Hume call it, “a public sphere”.<sup>125</sup> Their reasoning aspires to a certain degree of intersubjectivity, but this intersubjectivity and common conception of the aesthetic is one that is mostly aimed at, and reserved for a certain societal segment, ‘the privileged/ educated white male’. Furthermore, “Hume [was] able to motivate the acquisition of taste as well as the subject’s engagement with artworks by their roles in the civilizing project.”<sup>126</sup> Art (western art) being the ultimate aesthetic example for them, thus, entails this cultural promise in both its form and content. In this respect, in both Kant’s and Hume’s dialectics they compare ‘whiteness’ (as referred to by Monique Roelofs) to a cultural and civilizing promise, the so-called cultural promise of the aesthetic, and ‘Otherness’ to a threat.<sup>127</sup>

Subconsciously, the traditional Western Aesthetic has been formed in such a way that views otherness in a degrading manner, many times connected to ‘a threat’ as Roelofs dictates. The cultural promise of the aesthetic is the promise of a Western culture. In essence, as Hannah Arendt explains the inner workings of such a promise by a process of, “binding oneself through promises... serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by

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<sup>123</sup> Yuriko Saito, *Every day Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press (2008).

<sup>124</sup> Saito, 15.

<sup>125</sup> Monique Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of The Aesthetic*, Bloomsbury Academic, London (2014), 1.

<sup>126</sup> Roelofs, 34.

<sup>127</sup> Monique Roelofs, “Whiteness and Blackness as Aesthetic Productions” in *The Cultural Promise of The Aesthetic*, Bloomsbury Academic, London (2014).

definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men.”<sup>128</sup> The aesthetic, inherently, leads and guides us to make certain choices, not only artistic and cultural ones, but also in everyday choices. As Roelofs explains. “[a]esthetic norms, desires and values nourish ignorance as they affect which streets we enter or avoid, which people we meet or evade, which songs we love or shun, and which choices we judge unreachable or take for granted.”<sup>129</sup>

As Beáta Hock also explains, “In the mind of Enlightenment philosophes and travellers, the previously operational “North”/“South” civilizational division of the continent came to be replaced by the construct of “East” *versus* “West.” Whereas the earlier division contrasted the southern centers of lucid Renaissance culture with the perceived barbarism and boorishness of northwestern Europe, from this point on “Eastern Europe” came to be understood as a counterpoint to the advanced core. Situated within the same spatio-temporal matrix as “Western Europe” (for not as clearly distant in space or time as the East or Africa), yet backward relative to it, western Europe’s importance and civilized reason were thought to be unequivocally admired from this location.”<sup>130</sup> Therefore one can see, that this perceived cultural difference has been ongoing since the Enlightenment, but has been enforced through the politics of the Cold War. “The freshly dissolved Eastern Bloc was, and to some extent still is, widely imagined as a hermetically isolated cultural landscape, having always lacked access to cultural goods and flows from beyond its regional borders. In our experience, this Cold War-era hangover also retrospectively affects eastern Europe’s historical image. These mental constructs are all the more pervasive as they occupy central spaces in eastern European subjects’ self-understanding.”<sup>131</sup>

The aesthetic promise is that of a desired world, it’s the expectations one would have of the idealized utopia. However, the idea of the desired world is one that has increasingly changed since the time of Hume and Kant. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century the world and its societies have changed drastically – one can no longer apply the 19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic theories and perceptions of art on contemporary works of art nor wish for the same future and world 19<sup>th</sup> century societies wished for. The two worlds and contexts are completely separate – nearly clashing. Is this however to say that one culture has dominance over another? As Hock asserts, this world view has also affected the way in which Eastern European artists view themselves,

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<sup>128</sup> Roelofs, 201.

<sup>129</sup> Roelofs, 124.

<sup>130</sup> Hock, 5-6

<sup>131</sup> Hock, 5-6

preferring an association to the West, rather than to their own culture and traditions. Since one cannot talk in terms of disinterestedness, in the Kantian tradition, how can one break free from this pattern that seems to have dominated the world in a sort of universalist standard?

#### 4.2 Aesthetics and Identity Politics

Identity politics and aesthetics, may at first glance seem quite separate and estranged from each other but in fact it has often been the case that our aesthetic perception, i.e. our judgement of taste and quality has been affected by identity politics; in this case, the origin of the artist having a direct impact on our judgment of a work of art rather than judging objectively through the context it has been presented or placed in. By forming a world view where Western art and culture is idealized, we have been alienated to perceiving non-western art is of less cultural importance and quality. In the 1970s Western museums adopted multiculturalism policies in an effort to become more inclusive of non-Western art. Multiculturalism and new institutionalization led these institutions into the trap of binarism: Western/ Other, art/ non-art, international/ local etc. This is an issue as “the power relations of the artworld are much too complex to be captured by binary thinking.”<sup>132</sup> Even though multiculturalism was an effort for inclusion, the method it was done in, arguably opened up new problems rather than solving the already existing ones. “The identity politics of institutional multiculturalism is a sever obstacle to ‘true’ artistic recognition because it perpetuates a hierarchy in which Western artists obtain recognition on the basis of their individualistic artistic merits, whereas non-Western artists are only recognized as representatives of the ethnic community and local culture to which they or their ancestors belong.”<sup>133</sup> This phenomenon, could to some extent also encapsulate the legacy of studying non-western works of art in direct relation to the culture of their origin and not in a secular and objective manner in which works of Western artists’ work is appreciated. This was also one of the main problems artists witnessed in the Works and Words international manifestation in 1979: “organizers of exhibitions and events in the West were reproached for disregarding the work of (individual) artists from the East. Artists complained that whenever attention was devoted to them and their work it was always couched in terms of nationality or groupings, and never as individuals worthy of the same attention enjoyed somehow automatically or by default by Western artists.”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Anne Ring Petersen, “Identity Politics, Institutional Multiculturalism, and the Global Artworld.” *Third Text*, No.26 Vol.2, (2012), 201.

<sup>133</sup> Petersen, 196.

<sup>134</sup> Marga van Mechelen, “Works and Words” and “I AM”, 288.

When it comes to dealing with works of Western origin, the art world and art historians seem to have very complicated and refined theories and methods in order to interpret them. When dealing with non-Western artworks, this process generally becomes simplified in that a non-Western artwork becomes the representation of a specific culture or biography. The assumed cultural identity of the artist, which may have nothing to do with his art work is projected onto the work of art, leaving little room for further interpretative discourse.<sup>135</sup>

Petersen questions the ends of global art history, stating that art can never really be global: “strictly speaking, there is no such thing as global art, because that would mean art from every and nowhere.”<sup>136</sup> For her, art is always created in a local context and is therefore always local. A work of art can also only truly be understood locally. People always apply the context they are accustomed to, and this depends on the context of their upbringing and culture. It is very hard to ‘grasp’ the context if you have no relation to the culture – which many times causes the problem of misrepresentation or orientalism. For Petersen what is globalized, is not the art but the market and its institutions – the artworld. To make the art world and history of art more democratic, one should change the methods of approaching art and ask different questions, such as “how their works are shaped through the material practice of moving and settling and how that influences their sense of relatedness?”<sup>137</sup> Once the discipline of art history has managed to overcome the biases of identity politics it could become a more aesthetic and epistemological discipline, one that has acknowledged the limitations of 19<sup>th</sup> century politics of aesthetics: “we need to find better ways of deconstructing the misconception that the artist’s ethnical and cultural identity is the prime source of the work’s meaning.”<sup>138</sup>

Rasheed Araeen, originally from Pakistan, has experienced both sides of the debate concerning identity politics. He is of a ‘dissident culture’ and has experienced the art related bias as, but he is in the position to also write about art himself. Araeen constantly questions the universalization of the Western aesthetic, especially that of Kant, Hume and their contemporary European colleagues. The point of post-coloniality was to traverse the colonialist thought and culture ages and to transgress to a more democratic and diverse global society. Yet this mentality still precedes. Our aesthetic perception, also due to how we are taught about art at school, e.g. has not changed. In his article, *A New Beginning: Beyond Post-Colonial Cultural*

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<sup>135</sup> Petersen 202

<sup>136</sup> Petersen, 202.

<sup>137</sup> Petersen, 203.

<sup>138</sup> Petersen, 204.

*Theory and Identity Politics*<sup>139</sup> he stresses the necessity of a new beginning. However, in his argumentation, Araeen uses a methodology that stays true to the methodologies and mindset that he is so against. This is to a certain degree a very binary sort of thinking – West vs. Other. He has not come up with an alternative way of expressing his argument, which also works against him.

The link between identity politics and aesthetics is relevant and pressing for amendment. The ‘West’s’ projection of a specific idea of civilization and quality – a sort of single sided road meant to guide societies to amelioration, must no longer be assumed as a universal standard. This cultural promise, put bluntly, is no longer representative of a global world, but more of a colonial European one. It is important to understand this and try to change it, since our aesthetic judgements guide our worldview, our everyday choices and prejudices.

### 4.3 Case Study: Works and Words

When discussing trends of aesthetics and identity politics linked to art, the international manifestation ‘Works and Words’ of 1979 seems to provide the perfect example to tie the discussion together. Repeating the words of Marga van Mechelen about the outcome of the Works and Words: “Artists complained that whenever attention was devoted to them and their work it was always couched in terms of nationality or groupings, and never as individuals worthy of the same attention enjoyed somehow automatically or by default by Western artists. That perceived tendency would leave its mark on *Works and Words*, with both organizers and participants ultimately failing to dispel all such criticism and distrust.”<sup>140</sup> This is a very interesting observation as it brings the essence of the problem to the surface in a crystal-clear way.

Taking into account the concept of the manifestation, which was “to create a live-situation in which artists from different countries and backgrounds could discover the work and theories of others. We invited several Dutch artists and art historians. This would hopefully stimulate an active exchange of ideas, a clarifying discovery of mutual fantasies, conflicts and similarities. Our attempt to bridge the existing gap was an ambitious task.”<sup>141</sup> What is very interesting about the works shown in this manifestation is that the works of art that were presented, amongst all the countries seem to share a similar aesthetic, vibe, sentiment whatever

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<sup>139</sup> Rasheed Araeen, “A New Beginning: Beyond Post-Colonial Cultural Theory and Identity Politics.” *Third Text* 14, no. 50 (2000), 3-20.

<sup>140</sup> Marga van Mechelen, “Works and Words” and “I AM”, 288.

<sup>141</sup> Josine van Droffelaar, Piotr Olzanski (eds.), Introduction in *International Art Manifestation Amsterdam: Works and Words*, (Amsterdam: De Appel & Roma publications, 2018): 1.

one may call it. This could be the result of the De Appel team’s selection of artists, but what one should keep in mind is that the De Appel only chose the artists and not what works the artists sent in to be exhibited. The main concern I have with this exhibition is that even though, it seemed as though the works exhibited including all artists from all the countries seemed to have some sort of coherence, the critique for the Eastern European artists, given by Karel Schampers, was very degrading.<sup>142</sup> Maybe the conditions in which the manifestation took place in, i.e. accommodation for artists and the general organization and contextualization of the exhibition – a sort of camouflaged representation of East Central Europe through a non-signifying title – may have not been the most successful but nevertheless what one can see is that the cohesion is definitely visible.

When one takes into account the presence of the so-called iron curtain and the problem of cultural inter-association in the East Central European region, looking at the collection of art below, one cannot tell whether the art was produced in West or Eastern Europe. In many cases there doesn’t even seem to be a visual hint towards a different visual ‘tradition’. As these works of art are conceptual, where they do differ is in their inherent ideological contexts. The works of Eastern Central European artists, as discussed above seem to be disguised with a Western appearance, yet the context to which they are referencing is completely different, meaning one cannot read or interpret a work of art from East Central Europe with the same tools as one would use to interpret a Western one. However the whole point of conceptualism was the fluidity of its existence, that the power was within the concept and not so much the art work – therefore a lot of the critique that many of the artworks underwent could have also been described as ‘missing the point’.

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<sup>142</sup>Karel Schampers Review ‘Works and Words’, 1979. Research Folder, Digital Works and Words Archive, De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. (Translated version by Konstantinos Megapanos). “From what I have seen, I must say that I was disappointed. The films and the videotapes, especially those of Józef Robakowski and Ryszard Waśko, were quite dated in general, and resembled works of first year art students. It seemed as if most of the artists were holding a camera for the first time and were testing out the possibilities of photography as a different/ new medium of art. It was investigative but seemed like it was made without any effort. The photo exhibition, which was focused on conceptual photography, was of a reasonable standard. The strange thing was that a number of artists sent in the same works they had sent in for the exhibition “Oosteuropese Conceptuele Fotografie (Eindhoven, 1977). You want to ask yourself whether these artworks, for them, are masterworks; or if according to their taste, these are the works they think mostly resemble the Western tradition. As for the performances, only the Pole Jerzy Beres stood out. While the others made a rather artificial, cramped and sought-after impression, Beres was able to give meaning to ideas in such a simple, direct and intense way during a kind of ritual act that they immediately appealed to. The forums and readings, were characterized by a special dullness: the discussions that followed, were mostly extremely superficial and confrontations of different points of views were rare. In short, it wasn’t that uplifting.” (see footnote 105)

*In the following section, no information will be given about the art presented in order to not reveal their provenance. This is a selection of Western and East Central European works from the Works and Words International Art Manifestation (Check appendix for information).*



Figure 6



Figure 7

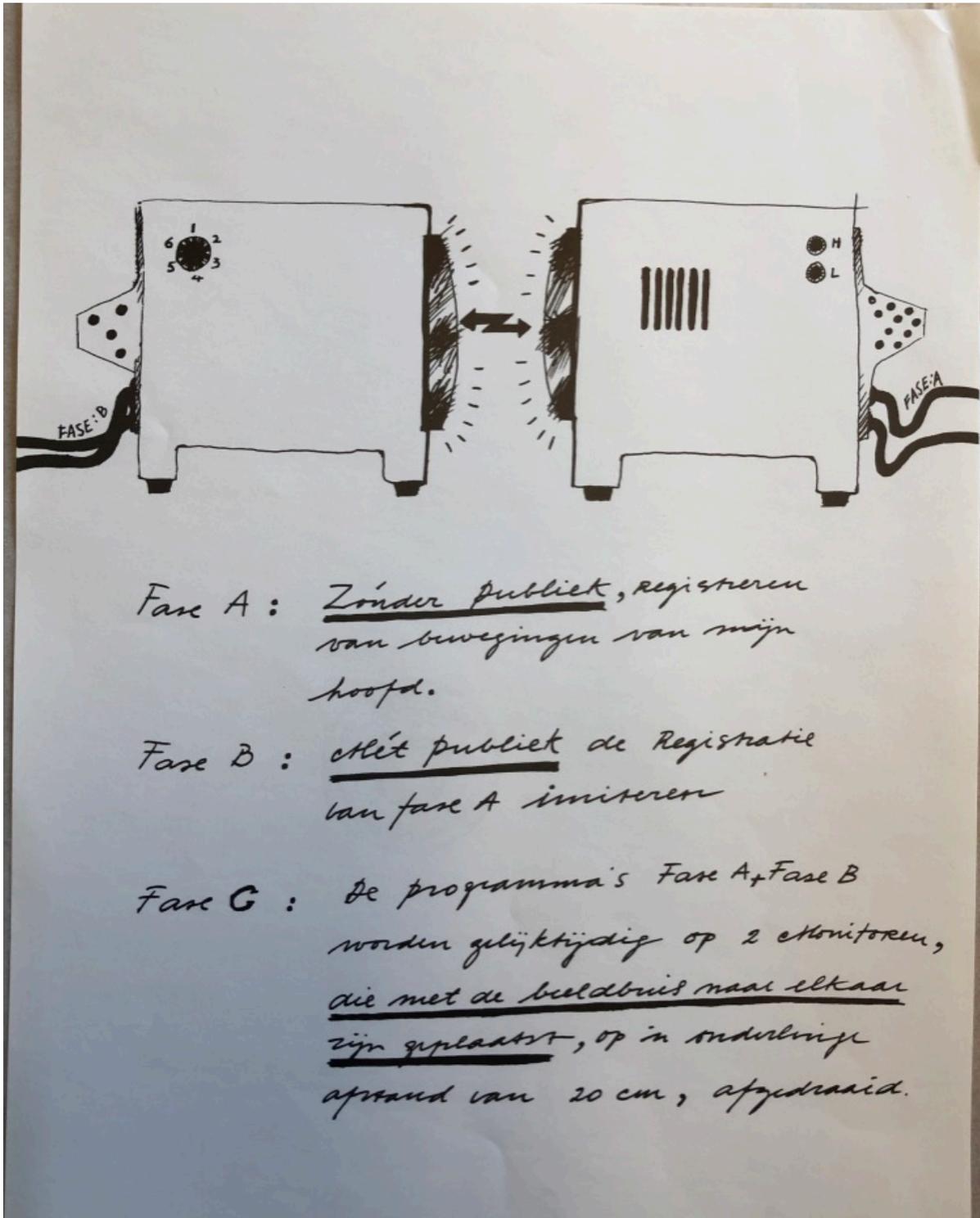


Figure 8

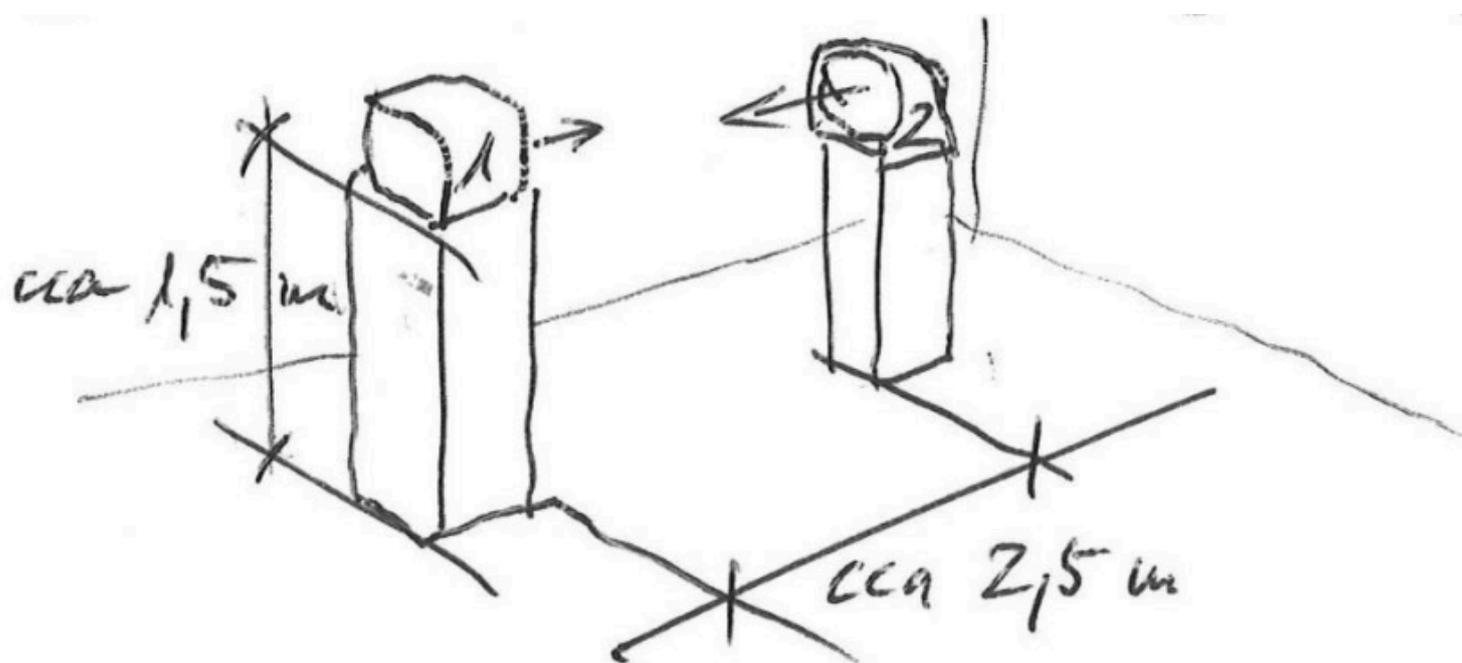
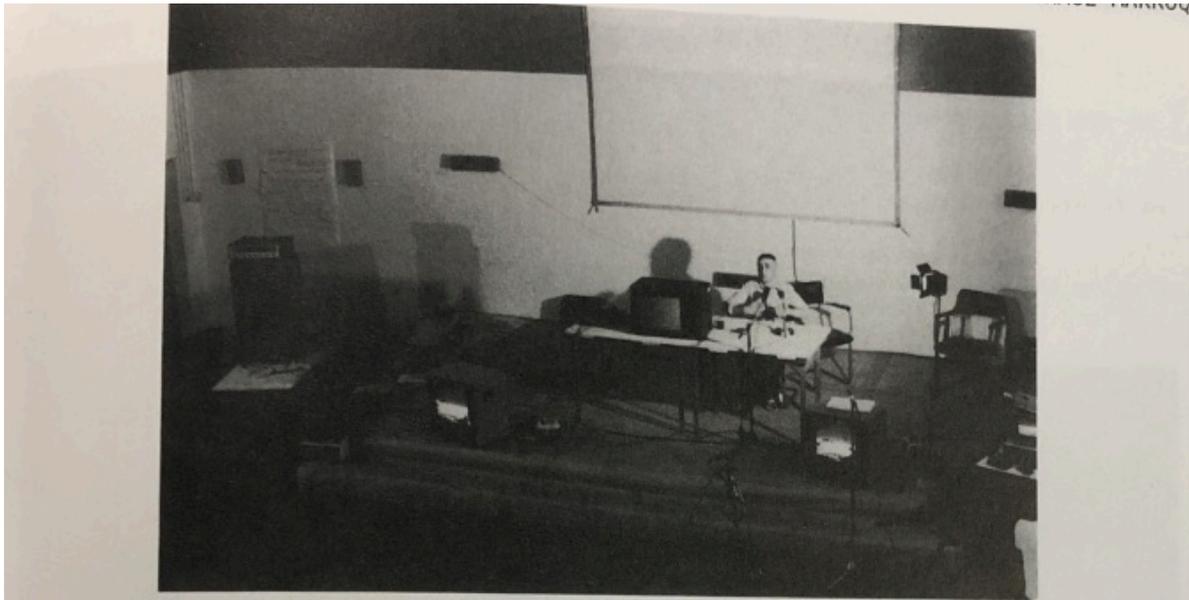


Figure 9



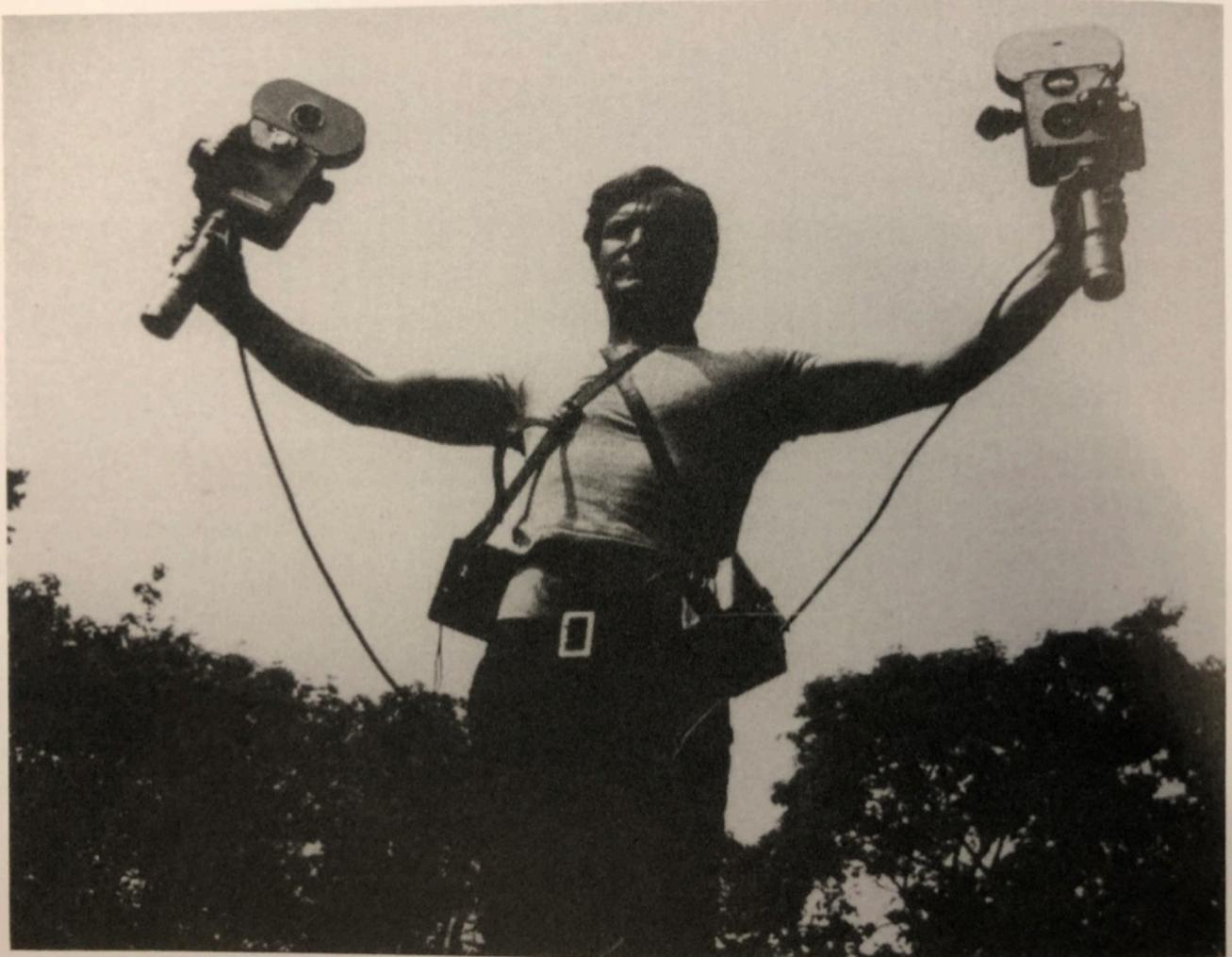
'VIDEO WITHIN THE VISUAL ARTS'  
lecture, September 26th 1979, Kapel Huis van Bewaring  
Amsterdam

- THE USES OF VIDEO WITHIN IN THE VISUAL ARTS
- THE VISUAL ARTISTS'S RESPONSABILITIES WHEN WORKING IN THE MASS MEDIA CONTEXT
- DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MEDIA DURING THE SEVENTIES
- CURRENT MEDIA-OFFERINGS FOR VISUAL ARTISTS
- THE AMERICAN-CANADIAN PHENOMENA, POSSIBILITIES IN WESTERN EUROPE
- TODAYS ARTISTS AND MEDIA TECHNOLOGY
- MEDIA-ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE



Figure 10

Exercise for two hands (two video camera's),  
performed in De Appel, September 22nd 1979



*Figure 11*

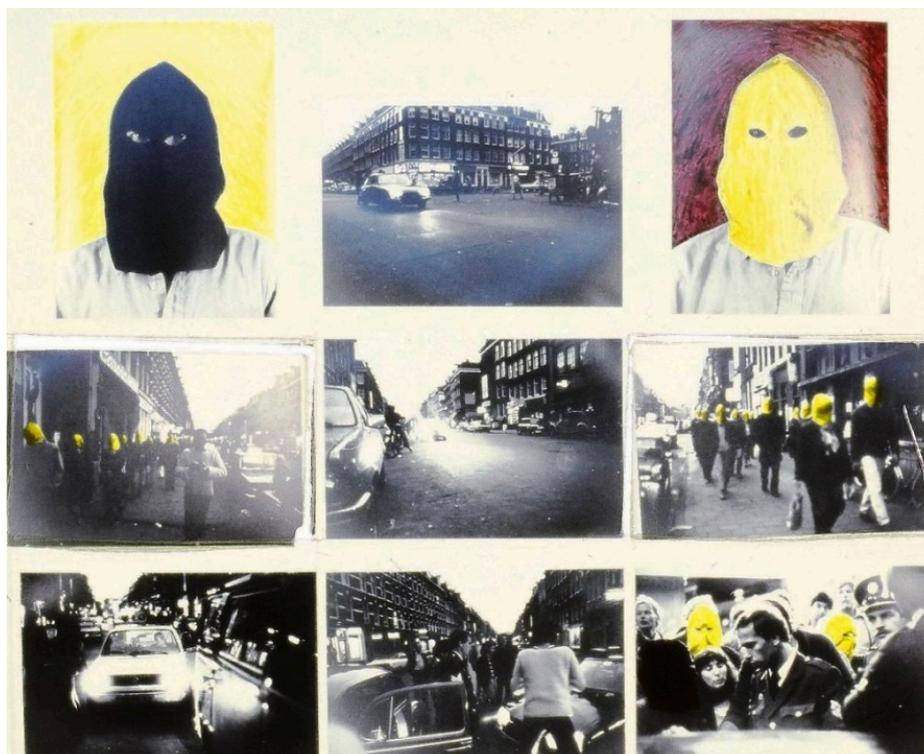
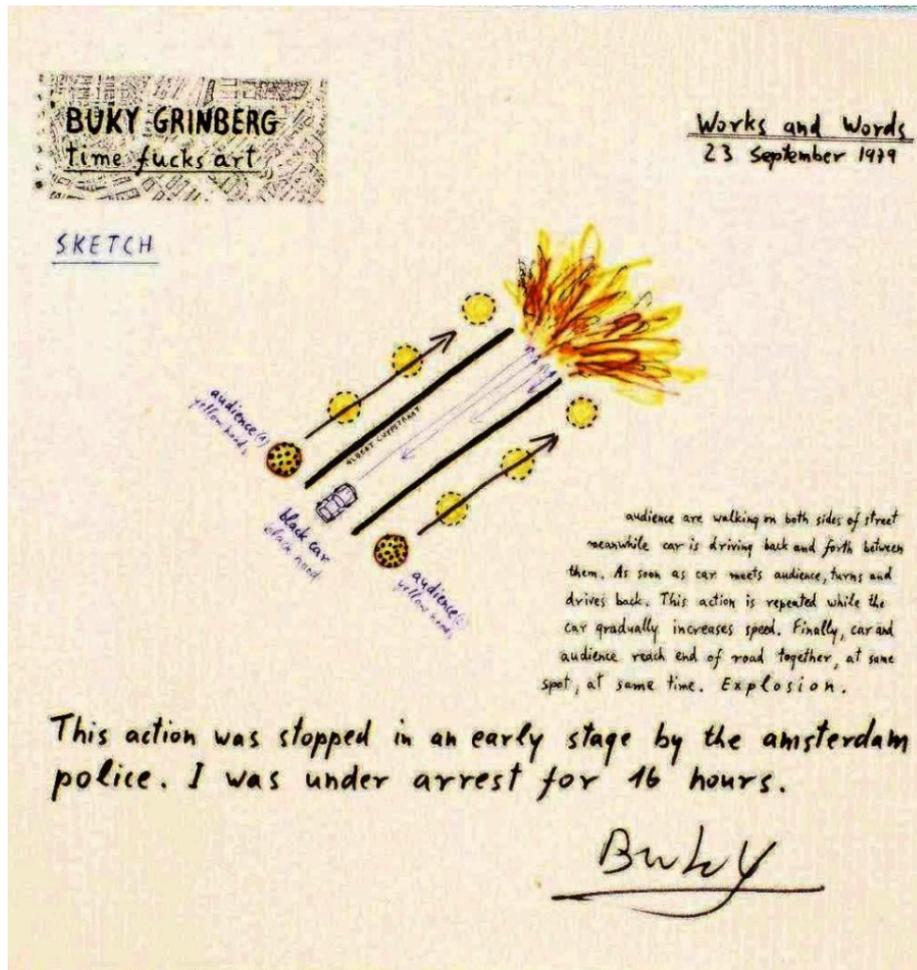


Figure 12a,b



*Figure 13*

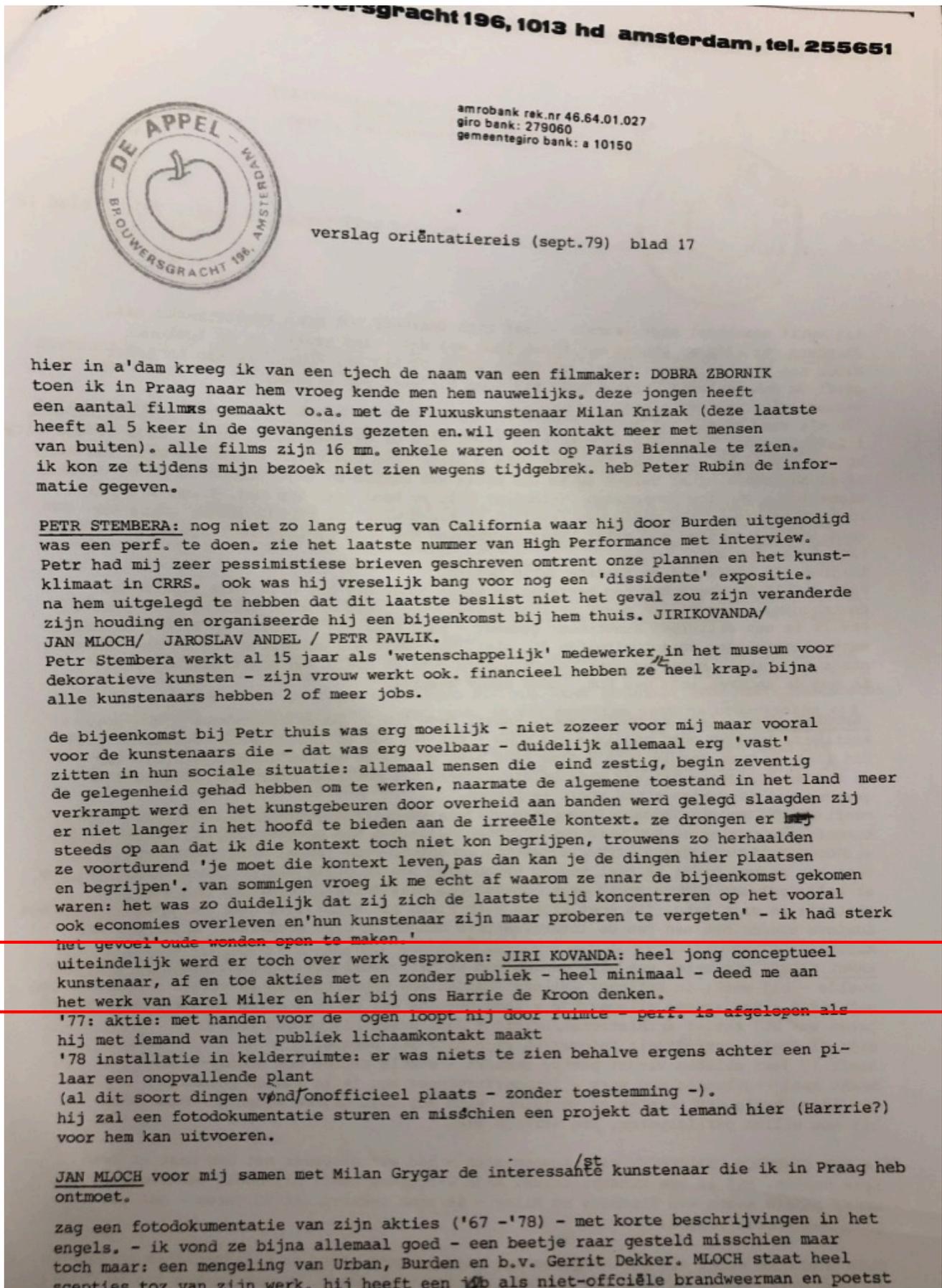


Figure 14. Excerpt from Aggy Smeets' Research Report to East Central Europe. Observation that Jiří Kovanda resembles the Dutch artist Harrie de Kroon.

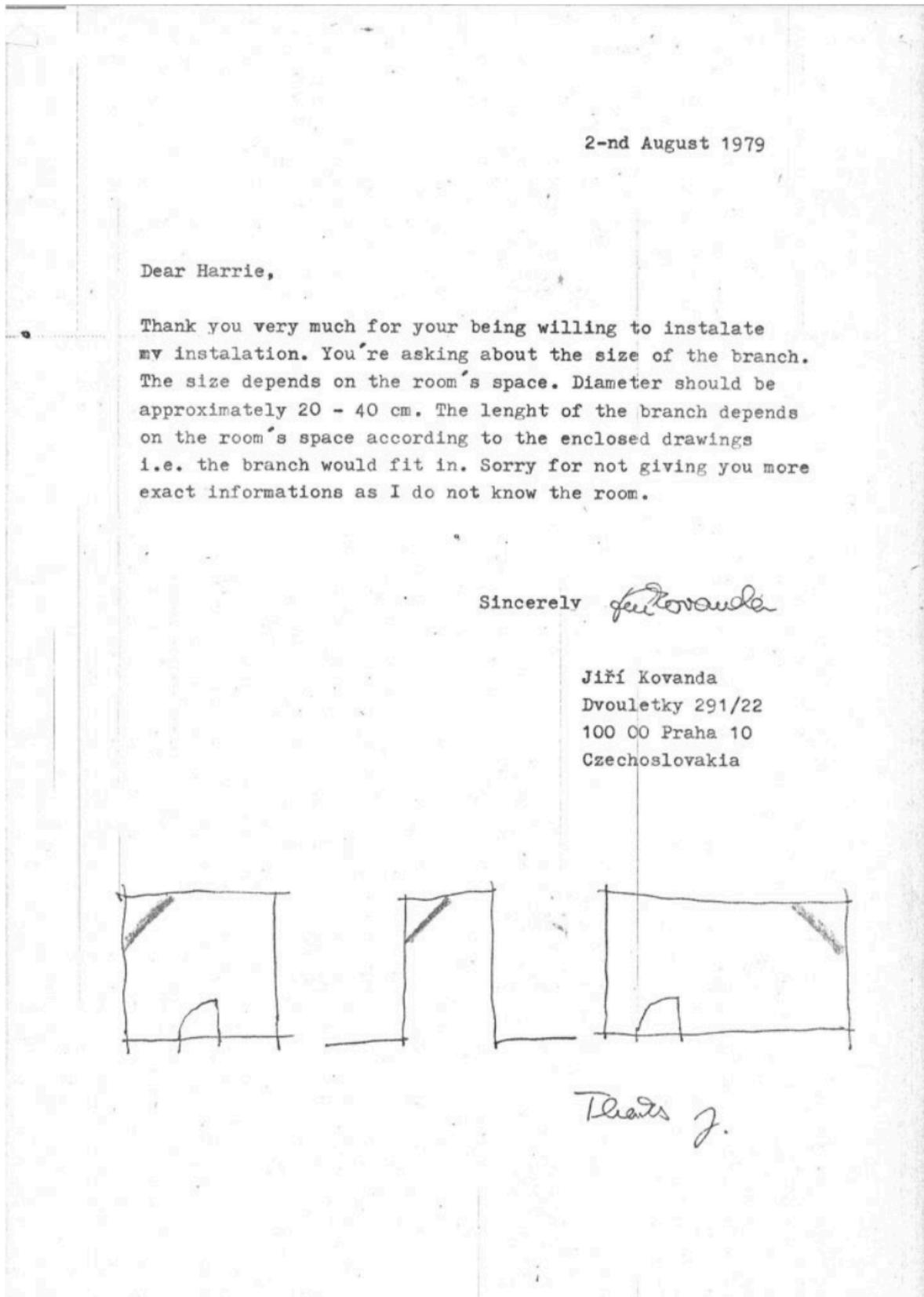


Figure 15. Jiří Kovanda's letter to Harrie de Kroon explaining how his installation should be installed because he could not make it to the Works and Words manifestation due to travel Visa issues, that most of the CSSR artists experienced.



*Figure 16 Jiří Kovanda's installation at the Works and Words International Art Manifestation realized by Harrie de Kroon, September 1979.*

The works showed in the previous section show a shared account of ideas, not only inter West and East but also inter Eastern. Without knowing who the artists are, it is very difficult to determine whether the work is made by a Dutch (Western) artist or not. In fact the last work of art, even though its concept originates from a Czechoslovakian artist, Jiří Kovanda, was assembled by the Dutch artist, Harrie de Kroon. As can be seen by the letter sent by Kovanda to De Appel, he asks Kroon to set up his installation but their artistic similarity had already been identified in the research phase when the De Appel team was conducting their research trip to East- Central Europe.<sup>143</sup>

Many themes that are relevant for both the East and West of Europe are revealed and shared between both sides. Such are for example the experimentation with communication, with movement and photography. What is also interesting is that artists from both West and East witnessed the same spirit of the late 60’s to the early 80s and have made works that reveal this need to demonstrate. Both sides were demonstrating for a certain ideological purpose, though it may have been a different one. Groys made an interesting point when talking about conceptualism in soviet Moscow which could also be applied to the East Central Europe, as for the Western European, East Central Europe fell under the same category as Russia. He says: “The problem is that if you invent something to differentiate yourself from the West, you create the illusion of being exotic. As it is, there is something there which is Western, as there is something here in Moscow specifically Russian. As such, it is a move towards self-exoticizing, which is perhaps a good selling practice, one of the best selling practices in art—particularly in our time, where everybody looks for difference. However, I think it’s a bad intellectual practice because, in fact, what is interesting about Moscow Conceptualism is its similarities with Western conceptualism. Not the fact that it is different, but the fact that it is similar.”<sup>144</sup>

‘Works and Words’ was in fact an effort to project and stress these similarities. According to Eda Čufer, also part of the E-flux interview series on Eastern European art, she believes that “Eastern art or the communist period is by default perceived as different. What we lack is a better theory of how the system functioned, to demonstrate the similarities with the present time, late capitalism.”<sup>145</sup> Her comment links the issue of the lack of historicity in

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<sup>143</sup> See Figure 14

<sup>144</sup> Boris Groys interviewed by Zdenka Badovinac in Zdenka Badovinac "Conceptual Art And Eastern Europe: Part II". 2013. E- Flux no 41 vol.1. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/41/60238/conceptual-art-and-eastern-europe-part-ii/E flux>

<sup>145</sup> Eda Čufer Groys interviewed by Zdenka Badovinac in Zdenka Badovinac "Conceptual Art And Eastern Europe: Part II". 2013. E- Flux no 41 vol.1. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/41/60238/conceptual-art-and-eastern-europe-part-ii/E flux>

this region together with the problem of identity politics. The fact that the Eastern Europeanness is a taboo, not only culturally but also art historically does not make talking about it easier but it also does not help ‘include’ it in the canon. The art history of this region, even though it may seem as if it could be bridged and put together, lacks the tools and methodology for it to be done in a representative and respectful way while incorporating the inner knots discussed in the previous chapters without the assumption that this could be done in a sort of a universal methodology.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

This chapter was more of an opportunity to look at the issue of the perception of East Central European and analyze it as a manner in which one could potentially reveal different questions in order to grasp it better. In essence, this chapter delved more into the possibilities of why we view this art differently and why we don’t seem to accredit this region’s cultural production similarly to that of the West. This is especially interesting when taking into account that most of these artists and cultures had the wish to resemble and to take on Western traits and culture.

Through the selection of art in this chapter, one has to admit to the presence of an aesthetic similarity and therefore has to wonder what the reasons behind the critique towards the East Central European artists was so demeaning. This question is also relevant as to why they are absent from modern and contemporary art histories. This leads one to wonder whether it was indeed a question of quality or a question of the influence of the politics of the time, our outdated cultural promise of the aesthetic or an engrained unconscious perception of the different or ‘Other’? There seemed to be a prejudice that whatever was produced in the Soviet Sphere was also, by default, not as good. As Josine van Droffelaar explained in her interview, which was mostly focused on performance art, a new medium at the time, she suggests to not ‘enter’ with a presumption that what you will experience utter nonsense.<sup>146</sup>

In a similar manner, since East Central Europe was and to a certain extent still is, tainted by its past submission to the Soviet Union, it does not help to attach such a bias to the work of its artists. To a large extent the work may have nothing to do with the political situation. It makes one wonder how very successful artists, such as Marina Abramovic have managed to escape from such biased critiques and how even though their origin is East Central European, it is not discussed in the same way as a work by Natalia LL or Rasa Todosijevic’s would be

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<sup>146</sup> Josine van Droffelaar, interviewed by Evelyn Jansen. Title: Ontzettend Moielijk en Niet Envoudig (Extremely Difficult and Not Easy). September 1979. VPRO Television Broadcast transcript. Press Release and Research Folder, Works and Words Archive, De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

discussed. The overarching question thus remains: how could one approach a work of art in the so called global contemporary art era and recognize the conceptual and aesthetic potential of the individual works of art instead of basing one’s judgment on the geographical and cultural origin of the artist?

## CHAPTER V: GLOBAL ART HISTORY, THE GREY ZONE AND THE RELEVANCE OF WORKS AND WORDS.

*“Art historians should realize that a canon is always an effect of an analytical and historical construction – more dependent on the historian than on the art accounted for.”<sup>147</sup>*

It comes as no surprise that the traditional way of looking and interpreting art comes to no avail when applied to the global contemporary art world. As Hans Belting asserts in his infamous publication: *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of the New Art World*, “Today art history faces a challenge of a different kind. The rise of new art worlds in many parts of the world demand a narrative that also takes into account the growing role of economics and the politics of art in describing art.”<sup>148</sup> This new way of interacting with art is a big shift from the singular way of looking at the history of art – i.e. of a Western backbone that influenced a progressive flow of ameliorating styles in pursuit of a certain cultural promise. “Entry into the global age where art production has become general not only marks a beginning but also an end, the end of the old-world map of art with its center and periphery scheme.”<sup>149</sup>

In sight of the global turn, as it is often called, the tendency has shifted from asking questions solely related to biographies, style, technique, symbolism etc. to more encompassing and general ones: “The global conditions of today’s art production leaves art history with unexpected questions. Can art history become global at all? Who writes art history in the future and does it need to be art history in the common sense and with a common concept not only of art but also of history?”<sup>150</sup> The effort to shift art history from its Western centralized model to a more global one is a very relevant one, but is it actually possible? In the case of East-Central Europe, it is difficult to see how such a model would apply when each country involved (in the *Grey Zone*)– would not be comfortable grouped together. Nevertheless, the story of the *Grey Zone* is one of marginalisation and ‘otherness’, one that is struggling for recognition, on an identity level but also on a historical level.

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<sup>147</sup> Piotrowski, “Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde,” 55.

<sup>148</sup> Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, Peter Weibel, Jacob Birken, John Clark, Manthia Diawara, Manthia Liu Ding et al. *The global contemporary and the rise of new art worlds*. MIT Press, 2013. 185.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid. 184.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. 183.

One of the biggest issues when considering the European continent in global art history is the post-war creation of an East and West. This model inherently leads to an asymmetric consideration of the one side vis-à-vis the other. The Western model is traditionally considered *the model* in which not only the Eastern European art scene ‘should’ aspire to, but also the rest of the world. In that sense, when considering Eastern European art, it often involves studying how what was done at the time in Eastern Europe is supposed to bring new answers to existing questions, when in fact one should be trying to formulate new ones.<sup>151</sup> Such a model relates to Saito’s perception of Western paradigmatic art and how the value and importance of non-western art is awarded depending on how close or far away such art is from the Western paradigmatic art of the time.<sup>152</sup>

The pressing issue of this thesis however is what the place of *The Grey Zone* is in a global contemporary art scene, as it does not necessarily seem to have been absorbed by this wave of globalization in history. One of the limitations of globalization, are of course, as with any sort of history, that one cannot include everything. Julian Bell, in his book “*A New History of Art: Mirror of the World*” compares history/ art history to the course of a river. The narrow source of the river is compared to the beginning of history, the further the river progress towards its mouth where it pours into the ocean, i.e. the present, the possibilities of what to include in history widen as one is surrounded by an ocean of possibilities.<sup>153</sup> Recording history is indeed a matter of selection and in that respect it is hard to determine what will remain in history and what will not.

Western scholars could have wanted to leave East-Central Europe out of the narrative for political and ideological reasons related to the Cold War, “nowadays we have something called the world heritage of art, a big bag enclosing all those fascinating objects people once made. To discuss global art history involves picking from the bag whatever fits the page and the argumentative purpose”;<sup>154</sup> As discussed earlier, the Eastern bloc was frowned upon, it was purposefully politically marginalized together with the entire Soviet Union as it appeared as a threat to the societal model the West was trying to build. Therefore, in Bell’s words, picking the topic of East Central Europe as a global art historical topic, would not *per se* fit the page

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<sup>151</sup> Jérôme Bazin,, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski. *Art beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe 1945-1989*, vol. 3. Central European University Press, 2016.: 5

<sup>152</sup> Yuriko Saito, *Every day Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press (2008).

<sup>153</sup> Julian Bell (Video Interview), “Mirror of the World” Thames & Hudson, 0:00 – 4:22, December 12, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jh795Lci4I8>

<sup>154</sup> Julian Bell, *A New History of Art: Mirror of the World*, (London, Thames & Hudson, 2010, 7.

nor the argumentative purpose of a Western art history. In any case, as has been witnessed with not only Works and Words, every time a Western exhibition focused on portraying art from East Central Europe, it was always done in a way where the artists did not feel they had been accurately represented.

In addressing the issue of globalization of art and art history, one must become aware that art history, as it has been known and studied for the majority of its existence, has been a purely Western conceptualization. Therefore, in order to write a global art history, one must question the methods of the entire discipline. James Elkins does this in his introduction to *Is Art History Global?* He asks: “What is the shape, or what are the shapes, of art history across the world? Is it becoming global – that is, does it have a recognisable form wherever it is practised? Can the methods, concepts and purposes of Western art history be suitable for art outside of Europe and North America? And if not, are there alternatives that are compatible with existing modes of art history?”<sup>155</sup> Elkins reaches the conclusion that art history is indeed a global enterprise and what unifies the field is the methods of writing the history of art and not necessarily its subject matter.<sup>156</sup> However in this way he promotes the idea that art history is dependent on a Western model in which any object can be understood or studied through.

Only looking at the example of the international art manifestation ‘Works and Words’, it is instantly clear how Elkins’ perception of global art history would only work for the eyes of a Western viewer. The recognizable forms he questions are those of a Western aesthetic and understanding across the world, which would already marginalize a lot of local art that may not fit within this model. A globalizing world requires a contemporary globalized view, not a Western view in a global world. Can one reach a globalized view, or what is the closest one can come to achieving this?

Lee Weng Choy, in contrast, believes that the answer for a global art history does not lie in a unified ‘global perspective’ i.e. to bring everything together to view things in a universal perspective, much alike to what happens in international biennials. He says: “but what we need to recognise are the perspectives that interrupt the global gaze. To share in the practices of art history is not necessarily to bring everything together into a single, unified perspective; such

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<sup>155</sup> James Elkins, ‘Art History as a Global Discipline’, in James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 3.

<sup>156</sup> Elkins, 15.

sharing can also make possible an appreciation of the distances in between these different practices.”<sup>157</sup>

Choy talks about the notion of grasping. To grasp the meaning of something is more than to understand it; it also involves a certain sensibility and feeling to it than just understanding. Much like how a Western viewer may understand the art produced in East Central Europe, but do they completely grasp the cultural context to which it alludes to or is the result of. “Our efforts to grasp the meanings of things, from contemporary culture to oceans, are conditioned very much by the fact that taken together it is all so big, so beyond our capacities to grasp. And yet we are those creatures who have defined ourselves by our acts of grasping. We are the animals with the opposable thumb.”<sup>158</sup> In that sense Choy proposes the method of grasping through dialogue rather than understanding through universalization. In essence he is trying to create a different path than that of the Western gaze. The world is too large, too complex and meticulous to view it through a singular perspective.

Choy’s proposition is especially useful in relation to the global contemporary age of art, since it often the case that it is not understood, or in his terms, grasped, as a result of its transformation since modernism. Paul Wood comes up with five general points on which contemporary art touches upon, or differs in from the art in previous eras. Those are, in short:

- “i. expanded range of materials out of which art is made.
- ii. increased importance of the curator.
- iii. questioning identity/ selfhood.
- iv. widespread focus on the local,
- v. widespread desire of contemporary artists to have an effect on the circumstances in

which they intervene.”<sup>159</sup>

The reasoning behind grasping rather than understanding in the global contemporary would be because it is an age which is subject to constant change. Wood calls this the contemporary condition in which he describes it as a state of constant transition, in contrast to the age of modernism which was marked by more Hegelian and Kantian goals of progression and improvement.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Choy, Lee Weng. "A Country of Last Whales—Contemplating the Horizon of Global Art History; Or, Can We Ever Really Understand How Big the World Is?." *Third Text* 25, no. 4 (2011): 453.

<sup>158</sup> Choy: 449.

<sup>159</sup> Paul Wood. *Western Art and the Wider World*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013.: 269

<sup>160</sup> Perry Wood, 279. “The contemporary condition, centrally determined by the fact of globalization is repeatedly characterized as a state of permanent transition. It is sharply distinguished from the previous period, which is named modernity, which was marked by goals such as ‘progress’ and ‘improvement’”

In response to all these approaches, Piotr Piotrowski proposes the solution of a horizontal art history. He explains this as follows: “A horizontal art history should begin with the deconstruction of vertical art history, that is, the history of Western art. A critical analysis should reveal the speaking subject: who speaks, on whose behalf, and for whom? This is not to cancel Western art history, but to call this type of narrative by its proper name, precisely as a “Western” narrative. In other words, I aim to separate two concepts which have usually been merged: the concept of Western modern art and the concept of universal art. Western art history can thus be relativized and placed next to other art historical narratives – in accordance with the horizontal paradigm. The consequence of such a move will be a reversal of the traditional view of the relationship between the art history of the margins and that of “our” art history (read: of the West).<sup>161</sup>

Piotrowski is aiming at a levelling of art history, where the Western approach would be equally considered locally rather than universally: a “relativization of Western art history in consequence of, among other procedures, the deconstruction of its analytical and geographical categories, as well as the “localization” of the center, must bring about similar processes in marginal art history.” This issue of localization is central to his argument, as he gives the example of books on the history of modern art, and explains how there are no local specifications or adjectives when talking about the ‘history of modernism’ (of the West). However, when it comes to including marginal modernisms, these histories immediately acquire adjectives specifying regions (in the case Balkan/ Eastern European/ East Central European etc.).<sup>162</sup> In essence what Piotrowski is aiming at is an Orientalizing gesture of all regions, meaning the dissolvment of centers in a scheme where the West would be treated as any of the other regions in the world.

### **5.1 Relevance of Works and Words**

‘Works and Words’, defining the broader case of East Central Europe, is one of these cases within the so-called global narrative of art history which has been marginalized. It is an area of the globe where due to a plethora of different reasons, mostly sociopolitical, the cultural production – related to art – has been marginalized and only recently has it become a topic of research. The case of East Central Europe is interesting because one witnesses a clear break in the presence of East Central European art and artists in the history of art post WWII; the art of

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<sup>161</sup> Piotrowski, “Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde”: 54

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. 55

this region ever since, entered the history of dissidence. In essence the term Eastern European is an invention of the West that alludes to an unrepresentative unification and cultural cohesion of this region and its people.<sup>163</sup>

In itself, the term ‘Eastern European’ connotes an area within the geographic region of Europe, but separates it from the rest of Europe with the localizing term: Eastern. As discussed earlier by Beáta Hock and Piotr Piotrowski, the term ‘close others’ may be the most appropriate to discuss this region. “Close others” are different from “real Others” in that they are almost, yet not quite, like the Self; their understanding of the world and cultural models are basically similar to, yet slightly different from, those of the Self (in this case, the West).<sup>164</sup> One sees this phenomenon taking place through Works and Words, where the East Central European art is indeed very similar to that of the Dutch artists, yet is approached differently.

“The Eastern bloc was characterized by an all-pervasive sameness... for many of my colleagues this ‘otherness’ was synonymous with being ‘not-quite-as-good’ as the West. They simply asked to be seen as ‘normal’ Europeans.<sup>165</sup> It is to a certain extent falsely assumed that there is lack of an art historical tradition in Eastern Europe. It appears as though artists don’t want to embrace their traditions but want to adopt those of the West, because ‘Eastern Europeanness’ is synonymous to otherness and ‘not as good’. One of the reasons why it is so difficult to talk about this region is the encountered lack of unity or a shared identity, but the expectation of one. Piotrowski continues by saying that, “One could even say that one of the key elements defining an Eastern European context and framing its artistic process, has been the effort to upgrade the value of our culture within the framework of universal categories, which in practice means with the Western perception.”<sup>166</sup> This as a result specifies a situation in which the West provides the framework through which the canon will be developed, such as hierarchy of values, aesthetical values and stylistic norms, and then it is the role of the peripheries to adopt them. In such a way it may be the case that the peripheries may have their own outstanding artists, but in order for them to gain recognition and art historical relevance it depends purely the West.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> László Zsuzsa. “Works and Words. The Invention and Renunciation of the Concept of East European Art.” *Institute of The Present*.

<sup>164</sup> Hock, 3

<sup>165</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, *In the shadow of Yalta: art and the avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*. (Reaktion, 2009), 12.

<sup>166</sup> Piotrowski, 28.

<sup>167</sup> Piotrowski “Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Gardes,” 51.

The particularity of East Central Europe as a historical and art historical subject has recently come under the attention of many scholars, hence the effort of De Appel to create a platform with its Footnotes exhibition series, to publicize a large portion of its archive in order to help current research in this field. Since the history of this region, is still under modification and construction, historians are given the chance to write a different history. Jelena Vesic on this note says that : “art museums through their monumental white spaces are re-producing the ‘second life’ of the documentation of ephemeral actions, informal happenings, and ‘secret’ exhibitions over and over again; they monumentalise grained black and white images of Eastern European art experiment in order to confirm their own fantasy-search for what is invisible, forgotten, non-represented, suppressed, censored, and therefore truly free. (...) Within this logic, the East European art enters the global (Western) museum not as the traditional piece of excellence, but as a document of dissidence”<sup>168</sup>

The 1979 Works and Words manifestation, is a special case where both East and West Europe united under a common theme, in order to bridge a gap, that to this day has not been bridged. The historical archive that has been stored in the De Appel archive in Amsterdam contains a lot of very useful information and accounts of events but also discussions through letter exchange. The issues discussed in this correspondence solidify a lot of the theoretical research of this region into more of a ‘scientific fact’ rather than the assumption of a few historians. Since many archives concerning this region, have either been lost, never gathered (due to the underground situation) or lost in translation, the case of the De Appel archive is a very unique one amongst all available sources, as it provides a lot of information in English amongst other languages such as French, Dutch and German. Bellow, are some of these accounts from East Central European theoreticians from the Works and Words manifestation that solidify a lot of the theories priory discussed:

“To try write about Czechoslovakian art today it is necessary, perhaps even vital, that one asks oneself how important it is that an artist and his art belong to a particular country or nation. But is such a question relevant these days when, according to McLuhan’s theories so popular in the sixties, the world is turning into a global village? If this is not the case with our world yet, it seems to be the case with art. The contemporary artist seems to be a resident of a global village with no borders: works of art in cognitive spirit appear everywhere, and it

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<sup>168</sup> Jelena Vesić, “Persistence of Independent Culture on the East and Internal Contradictions of Contemporary Independence,” in *Open Calls 2011–2016* (Bucharest: Salonul de proiecte, 2016).

happens that some artists living far apart seem sometimes to be more akin to each other than others living in the same town. (For instance, Petr Stembera seems to be closer to Terry Fox than to Karel Miler or Jiří Kovanda who live next door.) [...]“It is my conviction that contemporary art is necessarily moulded not only by the time of its origin/ which is supposed to account for its uniform outlook/ but also by the place of its origin/ which is one of the main reasons for the diversity of its outlook/ as well as the individuality of artists. I believe the international global unity/ which could easily turn into uniformity/ is today of less importance and interest than the meeting or encounter of a plurality of diverse traditions and individual authors’ attitudes. It is on behalf of such a meeting that this exhibition (Works and Words) is taking place, isn’t it?”<sup>169</sup>

“In a world so distinctly divided (into political and military blocs; into countries ranging from highly developed to extremely underdeveloped ones), one should not cherish the idealistic myth about the alleged internationalization of art, but neither should the reasons for the socio-political separation be automatically transposed onto the cultural level. Despite the understandable differences in languages and their meanings, some real chances to establish corresponding relations within the area of art still exist, not only between individuals but also between different social environments. The situation of the new art in Yugoslavia: The west east problem. [...] Consequently this could lead to the following conclusion: the differences in art systems of the West and the East undoubtedly exist; but they cannot, nor should they, push into the background the need of a detailed examination of all concrete individual contributions. Hence, despite all the sociological determinants, art today still is (and to an increasing extent) a problem of the individual identity of the persons involved, and only in this respect one can come to understand it in a right and adequate manner.<sup>170</sup>

The account of these theoreticians from 1979 are a reminder that the issues of identity politics, the universalism of Western theory and history, the narrowness of a cultural vision have been around and ‘contemporary’ for many years, yet a solution has not been proposed. As Choy

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<sup>169</sup> Jaroslav Anđel, “The Present Czechoslovakian Art Situation” in Droffelaar van, Josine, Piotr Olzanski (eds.)International Art Manifestation Amsterdam:Works and Words, (Amsterdam: De Appel & Roma publications, 2018), 69-70.

<sup>170</sup> Jesa Denegri, “The Situation of The New Art in Yugoslavia”, in Droffelaar van, Josine, Piotr Olzanski (eds.)International Art Manifestation Amsterdam:Works and Words, (Amsterdam: De Appel & Roma publications, 2018), 88-89.

says, once one grasps the idea of global art history and how huge of a field it is, it becomes harder to imagine whether a solution to such problems of canonization, marginalization etc. will ever be found. What can be changed however, is the way in which marginalized groups such as those of East Central Europe are presented.

A global perspective in the form of Elkins’ suggestion would mean that the *Grey Zone* would remain a blocked and unified art historical region, since to the gaze of a universalist it would be the most logical grouping. Taking into account Choy’s suggestion, once one has had the opportunity to indulge in a deeper reading it becomes evident that East Central Europe is a very complicated case, in a sense the Eastern European exists but only under specific conditions. “In a sense, East European art can only exist in a liberated condition when it cannot be associated with exclusion or the threat of losing independence and democracy. When East European as a geopolitical concept is reinvading the region, the concept of East European art cannot function properly. In Poland people told us that they don’t want to go *back* to Eastern Europe. In Bulgaria they are also not happy being East Europeans, they rather want to be Europeans.”<sup>171</sup>

Referring to this region as East-Central Europe has already been a step forward into deciphering the position of this region within the global map of art history, that does not bind it to unrepresentative presumptions and biases. The identity of this region, and the different cultures within it, are being rediscovered, initiatives such as Footnotes #3 ‘Works and Words’ are starting to pop up and the interest in filling up this art historical gap are growing exponentially. The state of the art world now is in a much more fluid position and condition, as Wood explained it: “In that condition (modernism), art seemed to have become so refined and overspecialized that it had ceased to be about very much beyond contemplation of the aesthetic as such. Whereas art how now emerged itself into the world so thoroughly that its own identity has become dissolved into the aestheticization of contingency”.<sup>172</sup>

The importance of Piotrowski’s methodology is that he stresses the need to counteract the assumption of the universalist approach of Westernism, in which the West influences the peripheries, but rather if the centers are also viewed as peripheries, there is in fact not that much that differentiates one to the other. In his words: “the call for “provincializing the center” discloses the fact that cultural metropolises within a hierarchically-defined art geography may

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<sup>171</sup> Maja Fowkes interviewed by Zsuzsa László. “On East European Art: Positions We Can Stand Behind and Speak From”, Mezosfera.org, October 2017. ([http://mezosfera.org/on-east-european-art-positions-we-can-stand-behind-and-speak-from/#\\_ftn1](http://mezosfera.org/on-east-european-art-positions-we-can-stand-behind-and-speak-from/#_ftn1))

<sup>172</sup> Wood, 287.

possess political, economic, and epistemic power, but they, too, are rooted in specific contexts, very much like any other location. Experiences and patterns observed there are particular as well and, hence, should have no stronger claim for general validity as processes unfolding at the margins.”<sup>173</sup>

Even though it is proposed to talk about the art history of this region, taking into account its very specific cultural disassociations, is it actually possible to ever include the art of this region in an overarching global narrative (whatever its form may be)? It seems as though each country in East Central Europe is witnessing an identity crisis, due to a possible transparency to the cultural promise of the West, in order to escape their association to the East. The expanding field of global art history is still a problematic case however for this region to be recorded as *The Grey Zone* does not seem to be the most promising of ways.

## CONCLUSION

The term *Grey Zone* as indicated in the title, and as has been used throughout this thesis, indicates the liminal (political and art historical) space in which the East Central European region (including Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary for the sake of this thesis) finds itself in. Its status as a ‘close other’ or ‘not quite European’ seems to have affected the development of this region’s identity. Through the closer look at the Works and Words international manifestation, one can draw parallels between the research and theory concerning this region, and realize that the issues discussed are actually still very much present. The very detailed series of correspondence between the De Appel and the Eastern European artists is a case in which one can detect many cultural differences as well as similarities between the two sides. The archives also serve as a time machine into the reality of 1979. It becomes ever more noticeable that many of the problems that were relevant back in 1979 for the relationship between East Central Europe and the rest of Europe, are still relevant today, even though the most of these countries are now member states of the European Union. Issues related to marginalization, representation and a certain bias linking Eastern Europe to a lower and ‘less civilized’ standard. However big this struggle for ‘Westernization’ may be for each individual country in the *Grey Zone*, they seem to be upholding the status of Eastern European for their neighboring countries, which in a way keeps the legacy of this term alive. This puzzling

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<sup>173</sup> Hock, 3.

network of interrelations and the lack of art historical tools, in sight of globalization, has resulted in the increasing difficulty to write a representative art history of this region.

The way in which I have studied the phenomenon of this issue concerning East Central Europe has been primarily through surfacing the archive of Works and Words and discussing it through a few major themes of importance. In order to fully grasp why this international manifestation was important and a rare occasion in 1979, the first step of this thesis placed East Central Europe into a sociopolitical context. I looked at what the sociopolitical implications of the new world order caused by the Cold had for the development of the identity of East Central Europe. This identity seemed to have been created and forced upon this region after the end of the war: described as a territory located between the Iron Curtain and the Soviet Union. It is the part of Europe that, due to the agreement signed between the Western powers and the Soviet Union at Yalta, found itself within the latter’s sphere of influence.”<sup>174</sup>

Even when taking into account the theory of a Nylon Curtain and the exchange of both people and ideas across the Wall – in which Works and Words can also be used as proof of - the duality caused during the Cold War persists to this day. This is the case even though previously soviet satellite states have been absorbed into the European bubble. Though each individual state of East Central Europe has tried to differentiate itself from the perception of a ‘deeper-less-civilized-Eastern region’ to achieve of closer association with the West, they are still facing an identity crisis, as can also be deduced from the recent rise of populism in many East Central European countries.

The sociopolitical situation of the *Grey Zone* also translated into the field of art history. Similarly to how every country of East Central Europe does not want to be culturally associated with each other, the art histories of this region have developed in parallel, but have never really overlapped. The main issue of an East Central European art history is related to whether one can actually write its art history. In theory it is possible, however the way in which it has been done, does not necessarily provide a representative account and ‘the best alternative’ has yet to be proposed. What is clear however, is that a universalist approach only leads to a dead end.

Another layer tallying to this art historical issue, is the availability of information and sources. Much of the art in question was purposefully made to evade the official lens and remain underground to avoid censorship and the alienation of concepts and ideas as well as the possible arrest for the production of an anti-soviet sentiment and ideology. The result of this process meant that many documents have been lost, many ideas were not shared, with

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<sup>174</sup> Piotr Piotrowski. “*In the shadow of Yalta*”, 7.

exceptions such as Fluxus mail art and the NET manifesto. All the art that was state funded was meant to promote the Soviet sphere and anything else was considered blasphemous. With the help of conceptualism and new art forms such as performance, installations, video art etc. many artists were able to share their ideas escaping the interference of the state, as the state did not know how to deal with such art and inherently also not how to censor it. To a certain extent, this gave the artists back their freedom to express themselves, and even though Westernism was generally avoided in the official sphere, the underground art scene, in general, resembled a Western aesthetic. This however led to another trap in which the conceptual differences and references differed from East to West but the art was camouflaged in a Western aesthetic, leading to misunderstandings. What applied for the conceptual photography of a Western artist did not directly correlate to similar work of an East-Central-European one, for example. Inherently, a problem seems to have arisen due to the addressing of art from different backgrounds through the same conceptual and methodological framework – leading to possible misrepresentations and misunderstandings.

Through studying the archive of Works and Words, it became ever more obvious that part of the historical marginalization seemed to not only root from historical reasons, but also to somewhat less rational ones. What is meant by less rational is that even though the East Central European art, in theory, may have looked very aesthetically similar to that of the West, for some reason it was not deemed to be of equal quality. Therefore, after taking into account the historical and art historical context in which East Central Europe found itself in 1979, my curiosity led this this thesis to look for answers in the field of aesthetics and identity politics, in order to understand why one’s judgment could alter depending on the geographic origin of a work of art. This bias was also one shared amongst the Eastern European countries as they felt a “subconscious resistance to the official propaganda of some specific identity for the Eastern bloc as a whole, and a claustrophobic complex of isolation of that part of the continent from the ‘true’ sources of culture, that is, the West.”<sup>175</sup>

The way in which art from East Central Europe has been portrayed and studied by Western institutions and art historians falls under the umbrella term of ‘Otherness’ whatever form that may be. In this sense, the case of East Central Europe is by no means a unique scenario in the wider field of global art history. However, it is one that may have been overlooked due to its strange status of ‘European, but not really’, as well as its complicated inter related history that does not allow for an overarching narrative. In essence, the tools and

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<sup>175</sup> Piotrowski “How to Write a History of Central-East European Art”, 7.

methodology to write an art history of this region have not yet been realized, leaving this region in a historically, but also socio-politically, liminal position, lacking a representative identity.

The cultural promise of the aesthetic, as discussed by Roelofs, has debatably changed since the in the Enlightenment in which it was originally coined– societies simply do not have the same expectations they did in 19<sup>th</sup> century societies, therefore why should the principles laid out in the theories of Kant and Hume still apply today? This is a key issue when considering art from East Central Europe and also to the discipline of global art history in general. The question of how one could one approach a work of art in the so called global contemporary art era and recognize the conceptual and aesthetic potential of the individual work instead of basing one’s judgment on the geographical and cultural origin of the artist, remains an unsolved one.

When placing East Central Europe in the context of a global art historical map, it is clear that one cannot take a universalist, meaning western centered, approach to understand it. Piotrowski, and Choy to a certain extent, agree that in order to write a global art history, one must level the so-called cores/ centers with the peripheries/margins – a provincialization of the center as Piotrowski calls it. This is in order to start a dialectical history rather than a hierarchical one, in which the global art historical map would no longer rotate around the West, but rather in a scheme of networks and inter influencing relations. Many times, the global art historical discipline seems to be aiming for a universalizing denominator that brings all art together, however it may be more important to focus on the heterogeneity rather than the homogeneity in order to find a solution to this debate.

All in all, it is clear that this issue is very complex with more than one reason contributing to the current state of the art history of East Central Europe. This thesis has suggested a few ways in which its place in the global map of art history can be reconsidered, while also acknowledging the need for bridging of this gap. As the local is being pushed back in favor of the global and identities seem to increasingly be merging together, the need for recognition in 21<sup>st</sup> century societies is ever more pressing. The case of Works and Words accentuates this contemporary struggle for recognition, just on the footstep of ‘the West’ rather than in further away cultures. The observations made in this thesis could be used in order to draw parallels with other regions of the world which may be facing similar issues. The scholarship and awareness on the topic of ‘Otherness’ has greatly progressed since 1979, yet there seems to have been little to no progress in reshaping this inequality. The problems that were relevant for 1979 are still relevant today, who’s to say they won’t still be in another 40 years? Through acknowledging and studying this societal and art historical gap in East Central

Europe, I believe to have portrayed the significance of the issues discussed in relation to our ever-globalizing world society.

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## Appendix

**Figure 1a.** Letter from Goran Đorđević to Josine van Droffelaar. Found in the Archives of De Appel. Amsterdam, The Netherlands. May 2019.

**Figure 1b.** Letter from Goran Đorđević to Josine van Droffelaar. Found in the Archives of De Appel. Amsterdam, The Netherlands. May 2019.

**Figure 2.** Letter from László Beke in response to Josine van Droffelaar. Found in De Appel archive, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. May 20, 2018.

**Figure 3.** Title suggestions. Found in the De Appel Archive. Amsterdam, The Netherlands. 29th May 2019.

**Figure 4.** Invitation to "Construction in Process -Art of the 70s". Archive of De Appel. May 20, 2019.

**Figure 5.** Net Manifestation Jarosław Kozłowski and Andrzej Kostołowski, 1971.  
<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/98/256870/net-an-open-proposition/>

**Figure 6.** Karel Miler (CSSR), ‘The Saint Me’, 1977. Exhibited at the Fundatie Kunsthuis during the Works and Words international manifestation in Amsterdam, September 1979.

**Figure 7.** Franklin Aalders (NL), ‘I am laying in the crash barrier’, 1977. Exhibited at the Fundatie Kunsthuis during the Works and Words international manifestation in Amsterdam, September 1979.

**Figure 8.** Harrie de Kroon (NL), Concept of Artwork, 1976. Found in Works and Words Archive at De Appel, Folder Harrie de Kroon. May 2019.

**Figure 9.** Zsigmund Károlyi (Hu), Concept of Artwork, (n.d.). Found in Works and Words Archive at De Appel, Folder Zsigmund Károlyi. May 2019.

**Figure 10.** Raoul Marroquin (NL), ‘Video Within the Visual Arts’ lecture, September 26<sup>th</sup> 1979, Kapel Huis van Bewaring, Amsterdam. Found in Droffelaar van, Josine, Piotr Olzanski (eds.) International Art Manifestation Amsterdam: Works and Words. Amsterdam: De Appel & Roma publications, 2018, 31.

**Figure 11.** Józef Robakowski, ‘Exercise for the two hands (two video cameras), performed in De Appel, September 22 1979. Found in Droffelaar van, Josine, Piotr Olzanski (eds.) International Art Manifestation Amsterdam: Works and Words. Amsterdam: De Appel & Roma publications, 2018, 40.

**Figure 12 a,b.** Bucky Grinberg, ‘Time Fucks Art’ performance concept performed during the Works and Words international art manifestation on September 23 1979 in Amsterdam. Found in the De Appel. Works and Words Archive. Folder: Bucky Grinberg. Amsterdam, The Netherlands, May 2019.

**Figure 13.** Endre Tót, ‘Gladness Demonstration’, Amsterdam September 1979. Droffelaar van, Josine, Piotr Olzanski (eds.) International Art Manifestation Amsterdam: Works and Words. Amsterdam: De Appel & Roma publications, 2018, 48.

**Figure 14.** Excerpt from Aggy Smeets’ Research Report to East Central Europe. Observation that Jiří Kovanda resembles the Dutch artist Harrie de Kroon. Smeets, Aggy. Found in ‘Verslag oriëntatierreis Polen, Hongarije, CRRS – februari 1979, 7 March 1979, Works and Words archive, Reisverslagen folder, De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

**Figure 15.** Jiří Kovanda’s letter to Harrie de Kroon explaining how his installation should be installed because he could not make it to the Works and Words manifestation due to travel Visa issues, that most of the CSSR artists experienced. Found in the De Appel Works and Words Archive. Folder: Jiří Kovanda. Amsterdam, The Netherlands, May 2019.

**Figure 16.** Jiří Kovanda’s installation at the Works and Words International Art Manifestation realized by Harrie de Kroon, September 1979. Found in Droffelaar van, Josine, Piotr Olzanski (eds.) International Art Manifestation Amsterdam: Works and Words. Amsterdam: De Appel & Roma publications, 2018, 26.