

Search ARTMargins

[New In ARTMargins Print](#)

[\(/index.php/110-about-artmargins/news/506-new-in-artmargins-print\)](#)

ARTMARGINS



[ARTMargins Print](http://www.mitpressjournals.org/loi/artm)
<http://www.mitpressjournals.org/toc/artm/6/2> has

released its new issue, 6.3. (October 2017)!

Articles: From the Editors

https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_e_00186 (free access); [Christopher Schmidt](#)

https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_a_00187.

Vik Muniz's Pictures of Garbage and the Aesthetics of Poverty; [Benjamin Murphy](#)

https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_a_00188.

Juan Downey's Ethnographic Present;

[Karen Benezra](#)

https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_a_00189. Response to

to "Art, Society/Text: A Few Remarks on the Current Relations of the Class Struggle in the Fields of Literary Production and Literary Ideologies."

Review: [Alex Kitnick](#)

https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_r_00190.

Pop on the Move

Document: [The Student Movement of May 1968 and the Fine Art Students](#)

https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_a_00193

(Amir Esbati), introd. [Morad Montazami](#)



<http://blog.artmargins.com>

OSTALGIA AT THE NEW MUSEUM (REVIEW ARTICLE)

WRITTEN BY ALISE TIFENTALE (NEW YORK)

PUBLISHED: 05 MARCH 2012

OSTALGIA, THE NEW MUSEUM, NEW YORK, JULY 6 - OCTOBER 2, 2011

The 'iron curtain' will stay with us for a long time: in our memories, in our lives that we cannot renounce, no matter how difficult they were and how hard we try.⁽¹⁾

Slavenka Drakulić, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*

When choosing a radically new project or goal, people can modify their past, making it interesting and enjoyable.⁽²⁾

Artis Svece, *Crop Rotation and the Aestheticization of the Past*

Conceived as "a survey devoted to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Republics,"⁽³⁾ this exhibition represents a politicized, exoticized, and marginalized view of art from the former Soviet empire, making the Communist past, or, more precisely, the Western notion of it, the central axis of the show. Deliberately blurred notions of geography and chronology complicate the rational coherence of the show, suggesting that diverse individual artistic practices and cultural backgrounds (from Central, Eastern, Southern, Northern European and Asian countries) belong to the same cultural milieu. Arguably the dialogue of art with a totalitarian regime creates the otherness that the Western audiences most often expect from the art of the former Communist bloc. Emphasizing this dialogue conveys the same simplified identity of the Other that has been continuously constructed in the West since the late 1960s by such seemingly contradictory players as leftist intellectuals and the capitalist art market, according to Éva Forgács.⁽⁴⁾

The romanticism of nostalgia implied by the show's title just disguises the central role of the political aspects of art and creativity that *Ostalgia* reveals; the curator, Massimiliano Gioni, clearly states that "none of the artists in the show would identify with a nostalgic (...) stance."⁽⁵⁾ The declared subjectivity of the curator's choices – "to move through history the way we move through personal memories, by sudden jumps and blurred recollections, by flashbacks and flash-forwards"⁽⁶⁾ – most often relates to the real or imagined "trauma" of the Communist past.

(https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_a_00192) (free access)

(http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/ARTM_a_00161)

Artist Project: Faride Mereb

(https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_a_00191).

Colophon as a Marginal Witness (free access)

[Click here for more information at the](#)

[MIT Press ARTMargins site](#)

(<http://www.mitpressjournals.org/loi/artm>).

Email Newsletter Signup

Email address:

Add

Regarding terminology, it's worth noting that Gioni prefers "outsider" to "nonconformist," a term that has been widely used in connection with the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Soviet Nonconformist Art, a generous lender of several works in the show. Considering the curator's interest in visual culture(7), "outsider" obviously allows him more freedom to avoid the chronological, geopolitical and artistic specificity implied by extensive scholarship related to the Dodge collection.

Introducing the concept of outsiders, *Ostalgia* revives the specter of the evil empire and spotlights resistance to and escape from the Soviet art hierarchy, although this adversary itself is left completely to the viewer's imagination. At times, the idea of an outsider artist is generalized and brought to extremes, embracing amateurs, the mentally ill, and even a sex-obsessed adolescent, thus losing the otherwise strong focus on an artist's relationship with Soviet ideology.

In this aspect, *Ostalgia* offers a compact illustration of Hal Foster's essay dealing with the "aura of mysticism and romanticism," which modernists created around drawings and paintings produced by three categories of marginalized groups – the mentally ill, the primitive, and the child(8). All three are represented in *Ostalgia*: the self-therapeutic works of Alexander Lobanov and Anna Zemánková; the motif of the primitive or the savage in objects by Evgeny Antufiev, reminiscent of shamanistic practice; and pages from a comic book by Evgeny Kozlov (E-E) plainly manifesting the erotic fantasies of an unruly male adolescent. Although they make the Other look even more exotic, these works cannot be easily related to the rest of the show. One may ask if their inclusion goes unnecessarily far in marginalizing the whole history of art under Communist rule, replacing any other concerns with the generic shock value that this kind of creativity might offer.

Focusing on the idea of political resistance to the Soviet ideological confinement, *Ostalgia* presents the viewer with ample evidence that the artists heroically fought against the regime in their art, illustrating the curator's statement that "the artist – though forced to the margins – feels invested with an ethical duty to single-handedly oppose the regime." (9) However, the outsider artist's implied heroic mission is called into question by the curator's observation that "many of the artists in 'Ostalgia' insist that their work has nothing to do with the political climate that surrounded them." (10)

The inherent paradox lies in the incompatibility of artistic diversity with ideological uniformity. The creativity of multiple artists living and working under different Soviet socialist governments theoretically can be reduced to the common ground of political commentary. Yet such a reduction clearly represents expectations and perceptions Western audiences inherited from the Cold War era, as aptly pointed out by Éva Forgács: "Ironically, while many artists of Eastern Europe tended to escape the mire of the politicization of art and hoped for international recognition on the basis of their artistic achievement, the art of the region got recognition only when it politically fell into place in the Western context." (11)

Ideologically engaged works have proven to be those most easily recognized in the West, and most disappointing at the same time. For instance, Nana Asfour noticed that "*Ostalgia* has little to tell us about life under Communism that we don't already know. . . . As one might expect, imagery taken from Soviet propaganda abounds." (12) Or, as *Artnet's* Walter Robinson has put it, *Ostalgia* "suggests a kind of Iron Curtain esthetic that pretty much confirms the grim version of Soviet life we're all familiar with." (13) The power of easily recognized political references can simplify matters and identify the vast post-Socialist space with such exceptional phenomena as the circle of Moscow Conceptualists. Peter

Osnos, former Moscow correspondent at the *Washington Post*, noted that “what is missing from the display is the collective irony of the underground work. There is an earnestness to the art that makes it seem less inventive or engaging than it should be.”(14)

While the emphasis on the political aspects of art from our side of the Iron Curtain arguably helps the curator to tell the story of an imagined Communist past, the real otherness stays unexplored. Boris Groys has pinpointed one of the most important factors of the incompatibility of artistic production from the West and the former Communist bloc: the absence of a free art market within the Soviet system. Éva Forgács adds the lack of critical discourse as a similarly significant factor.(15) Expanding on the latter observation, it is necessary to emphasize the different structure and content of the whole information sphere, the restricted movement of persons and ideas, and the contrasting social and economic experiences that complicate attempts to fit the former Communist bloc’s art history into that of the West.

The curator uses formal analogies in order to offer Western viewers a frame of reference, however artificial this frame could be. It is not clear if the resulting impression is misleading or enlightening, when, for instance, the label of embroidery pieces by Romanian artist Geta Brătescu links her artistic practice to the work of Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, and Vito Acconci. Another example, *Contemporary Russian Folk Artifacts* — a series of photographs by Vladimir Arkhipov — depicts manually produced or altered tools and appliances. These curious objects were a part of everyday life for many families in the immediate post-Soviet economy, when much was left to a compulsory DIY (do it yourself) culture. The curator nonchalantly calls them “a dream of a truly social sculpture, or the proof that every man is an artist, as Joseph Beuys would have said.”(16)

When household objects born out of extreme poverty, misery, and chaos are compared to “small spontaneous Fischli and Weiss pieces,” one thinks of “aesthetic cynicism,” the term Aleksis Osmanis used to describe the purely formal preferences of some critics who reevaluate art from the Soviet period.(17) According to Gioni, “maybe it just means we are understanding [the work] from a different perspective, which hopefully can only add to the richness of the interpretation of that work.”(18) However, this eventual richness can easily turn into one-dimensional acclaim of selected formal features, an approach inherited from Roger Fry’s *Negro Sculpture*, which maintains the authoritarian and patronizing Western viewpoint.

Created within a society that lacked an art market, the exhibited works nevertheless have entered the Western art market and should be viewed also on that basis. It is worth exploring the show’s structure in terms of the ownership of the pieces on display. According to the catalogue, works by fifty-eight artists (including groups of artists) were presented. Considering their city of birth and the places where they live and work, one could assume that fifty-two from these artists are physically linked with former Soviet or Communist bloc countries. Altogether, works by thirty-six of these fifty-two were identified as being on loan from private collections or museums located in Western Europe or the United States, or currently on sale in galleries operating in Western countries. However, just four artists were represented by loans from non-Western collections or courtesy of galleries operating only in the former Communist bloc. Works by the remaining twelve artists were marked as “courtesy of the artist” or as being on loan from unspecified private collections.

This overview suggests two conclusions related to the sources of art history that *Ostalgia* represents. First, the dominance of works owned by museums or collectors in the West or offered for sale by galleries operating in the West clearly marks the Western-centered

point of view. Recent research and curatorial preferences in local art scenes are not taken into account, although art historians and curators working within the post-Soviet space can have radically different opinions on the art of their own cultural milieu.

Second, the exhibition is not based on original research of primary sources (as was the extensive and surprising show *Gender Check. Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* curated by Bojana Pejić in 2009); instead, it's drawn from available collections which, in their turn, mostly have been created around a Russian-centered view. As Éva Forgács has noted on the process that started in the 1970s, "the quick introduction of East-European art to the market resulted in a selective display of it, with a focus on those trends that tied it to the Russians."⁽¹⁹⁾ Extending or forging a link with Russian avant-garde was necessary because it had already established a niche in the Western art market. Therefore, everything post-Soviet is often still identified with a Russian perspective. The writings of Boris Groys, Svetlana Boym, Victor Misiano, Ekaterina Degot in the catalogue definitely refer to the specific situation in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Other sources addressed in the introductory essay are mainly from the field of literature, and mostly Russian, such as Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Brodsky, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, plus the Czech writers Milan Kundera and Václav Havel, and Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulić.

Thus *Ostalgia* encourages the canonization of works that reflect the tastes and formal preferences of a narrow circle of mainly Western collectors, and narratives by mainly Russian critics and theoreticians. Art from a large part of Europe therefore seems doomed to be viewed only as a heroic gesture of political resistance that can easily "fit into either the Western or the Russian narrative,"⁽²⁰⁾ without individual artists, trends, or schools having a distinct, singular voice outside these two grand narratives.

An earlier version of the article "We from Nowhere and Our Art" appeared in the visual arts magazine *Studija* 81, no. 6 (2011): 58-65.

The author wishes to thank Claire Bishop and Mark Allen Svede for their valuable comments.

Alise Tifentale is an art historian, editor, writer, and curator. Her interests include history of photography in the 20th century, influence of Soviet ideology on European art and architecture, and history of new media art. She is a founder of magazine *Foto Kvartals*, and served as its editor-in-chief (2006-2010). She has published articles and book chapters, has edited books and delivered papers on art and photography of Soviet and post-Soviet era. Her latest book is *The Photograph as Art in Latvia, 1960-1969* (Riga: Neputns, 2011).



For another review of this show, see:

"Ostalgia at the New Museum (Review Article)" by Susan Snodgrass
(<http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/651-ostalgia-at-the-new-museum>)

1. Slavenka Drakulić, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 121.

[[back](#)]

2. Artis Svece, "Augu seka un pagātnes estetizēšana = Crop Rotation and the Aestheticization of the Past," in *Homo aestheticus: no mākslas filozofijas līdz ikdienas dzīves estētikai* = *Homo aestheticus: From philosophy of*

- art to aesthetics of everyday life, ed. Māra Rubene (Riga: Tapals 2001), 128. Quote translated into English by Valdis Bērziņš. [\[back\]](#)
3. Press release from April 18, 2011, available at the museum's website <http://newmuseum.org> [\[back\]](#)
4. Éva Forgács, "How the New Left Invented East-European Art," *Centropa*, 3:2, 2003, 97-100. [\[back\]](#)
5. Massimiliano Gioni, "Ostalgia," in *Ostalgia* (New York: New Museum, 2011), 25 [\[back\]](#)
6. Gioni quoted after: Christian Viveros-Fauné, "Ostalgia: A Walk Around the Bloc. The New Museum Looks Back at Life During Communism," *Village Voice*, July 13, 2011. [\[back\]](#)
7. "I have been more and more interested in looking not just at art but at – let's say – visual culture or at looking at art as part of a visual culture." Massimiliano Gioni, E-mail to the author, October 17, 2011. [\[back\]](#)
8. Hal Foster, "Blinded Insights: On the Modernist Reception of the Art of the Mentally Ill," *October* 97, 2001, 3; 14. [\[back\]](#)
9. Gioni, "Ostalgia," 26. [\[back\]](#)
10. Gioni, "Ostalgia," 29. [\[back\]](#)
11. Forgács, "How the New Left Invented East-European Art," 103. [\[back\]](#)
12. Nana Asfour, "The NewMu Looks Back at the Soviet Era," *Time Out New York*, September 21, 2011. [\[back\]](#)
13. Walter Robinson, "Ostalgia. East Infection," *Artnet Magazine*, July 14, 2011. [\[back\]](#)
14. Peter Osnos, "Understanding Ostalgia, the Strange Longing for Soviet-Era Art," *The Atlantic*, August 16, 2011. [\[back\]](#)
15. Forgács, "How the New Left Invented East-European Art," 93. [\[back\]](#)
16. Gioni, "Ostalgia," 28. [\[back\]](#)
17. Aleksis Osmanis, "Varas ideoloģija un metamorfozes latviešu glezniecībā = Ideology and Metamorphoses of Power in Latvian Painting," in *Glezniecība: Laikmeta liecinieki: 20. gadsimta 60., 70. un 80. gadi: Latvijas Mākslinieku savienības mākslas darbu kolekcija = Painting: Witnesses of an era: 1960s, 1970s and 1980s: Collection of Artists' Union of Latvia* ed. Inese Baranovska (Riga: Artists' Union of Latvia, 2002), 24. [\[back\]](#)
18. Gioni, E-mail. [\[back\]](#)
19. Forgács, "How the New Left Invented East-European Art," 100. [\[back\]](#)
20. Forgács, "How the New Left Invented East-European Art," 102. [\[back\]](#)