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Contemporary art across the evolving global peripheries

INTERVIEWS

Transitland: Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989-2009 (Interview)

BY RÉKA DEIM (BUDAPEST) · PUBLISHED 12/31/2009

Transitland EUROPA is a collaborative archive of 100 videos that reflect on the transitions and transformations in the post-Socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The videos include works from the past twenty years, from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the present. As part of the project, a reader of more than 300 pages was published, containing essays by several experts from the region, as well as short descriptions of all the video works included in the archive. In addition, several video jukeboxes, a website, and several discursive events will allow viewers to enter the Transitland Archive.

The following series of interviews with several organizers involved in the project was compiled by Réka Deim. Deim was an intern at the Agency for Contemporary Art Exchange (ACAX)—one of three agencies involved in the project—when she became familiar with Transitland Archive. Deim spoke with the project's director, Margarita Dorovska (InterSpace; Sofia); Kathy Rae Huffman (curator); Stephen Kovats (Transmediale, Berlin); Barnabás Bencsik (Ludwig Museum—Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest); Edit András (editor of the upcoming publication *Transitland. Video Art from Central and*

Eastern Europe 1989-2009); and Rita Kálmán and Tijana Stepanovic (project curators at ACAX).

Margarita Dorvoska is a curator at InterSpace Association, Sofia. Since 2005 she has been managing director of Cult.bg Foundation (<http://foundation.cult.bg>), where she has been engaged in projects for research and development in cultural policy, advocacy and NGO consolidation.

Kathy Rae Huffman (USA/UK/DE) is a freelance curator, networker and media art collector. She is lead curator for the exhibition *Exchange and Evolution* (2011/12), which is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Stephen Kovats (Germany/Canada) is the artistic director of the transmediale festival, Berlin. (www.transmediale.de)

Barnabás Bencsik is the director of Ludwig Museum–Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest. He is author of several publication on contemporary art in Hungarian and international magazines, as well as exhibition catalogues.

Edit András is an art historian at the Research Institute for Art History at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest. She has widely published on Eastern-Central European contemporary art, mainly on gender issues, socially engaged art, public art, and art theory in relation to the post-socialist countries and their transitions.

Rita Kálmán is an art historian and curator.

Tijana Stepanovic (1980) is a curator, art critic, and the leader of ACAX | Agency for Contemporary Art Exchange (2006-) that operates in the frame of the Ludwig Museum–Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest.

Réka Deim: As project director of *Transitland. Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989-2009* archiving project, why do you find the examination of video art in post-Socialist countries relevant?

Margarita Dorovska: The project brings to the attention of the general public diverse artists' observations and positions on a very recent period that is yet to become history and subject of re-evaluation. *Transitland* is definitely also of interest to art historians and curators as it contains works to be re-discovered,

but also works that have never been widely shown. Video from Central and Eastern Europe still has little presence internationally, but even less so in view of the written histories of video art. Our aim was to bring together as a body of work video pieces that relate to and reflect upon the transformations in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 and, as such, the archive is a significant contribution to the existing theoretical discourse on the period. On one hand it is exactly the transition period that made the development and flourishing of video possible in the region, on the other hand video was the medium most used by artists to document and reflect upon the transformations that were taking place. It is the medium of the transition period.

RD: I assume there is great international interest in the project. As far as I know, the project included building some video jukeboxes (players), which can be provided to research centers, museums, art centers, and educational institutions. Where exactly do you plan to install the jukeboxes?

MD: One jukebox is already available at the library of Collegium Hungaricum in Berlin, another will be located at Ludwig Museum, and one is to be installed in Sofia. Four more jukeboxes are available to research centers and museums, as long as the hosting institutions can dedicate space for them and indeed make them accessible for research.

RD: How else is the Archive available for further research?

MD: The archive is covered on the project's website www.transitland.eu  where one can find a short text for each work. Depending on the decision of the artists, the works are presented with stills, video excerpts, or in full length.

RD: What long-term results are expected from the project?

MD: Most of these videos are not present in collections, not subject to distribution, so making them available for curatorial research—online and through the jukebox players—is what, in the long run, is most important, both in terms of making the works more present, as well as to further understanding about the project's subject matter.

Réka Deim: You were project curator and member of the international jury that made the final selection of the video archive. What steps preceded the jury's work and who else was involved in suggesting videos?

Kathy Rae Huffman: According to an agreement between the partners—from InterSpace, ACAX, and transmediale—we identified curators, artists, and art historians who were experts in Central and Eastern European video art and directed them to select a number of nominators. Several of the potential nominators were unable to comply because of a heavy workload. Some of the nominators did not respond with a wide selection of works. We were depending on the nominators to bring us a wide number of works to choose from. We (partners) looked for experienced people who had experience in many countries. Moreover, the partners were also able to nominate artists to be considered for selection. Each nominator was limited to 10 artists.

After our initial jury meeting we looked at the geographic areas that were not represented (in the nomination and the selection), and asked several of the nominators for further suggestions. These additional works were uploaded to a special website location where the jury could respond. Discussion continued online. This was a very laborious process and was rigorously respected by all the jury members.

RD: What principles were significant in compiling the Archive?

KRH: As stated clearly in all the project descriptions and in the catalog, it was important to see how artists from (and working in) Central and Eastern Europe responded to the transition from Communism, between 1989-2009.

We consciously choose not to consider works before 1989, and there are many artists who produced wonderful works before 1989—or video works that focused on other topics, other periods of time entirely. We did not consider multi-channel or installation works. Then, ultimately, each artist needed to agree to be part of the archive.

The jury was not so concerned for quality—understanding the various levels of technical support and availability of video

RD: How did the proportion of videos evolve? Why is it that Slovakian video art, which is considered highly plentiful, is represented only by two works and, in contrast, there are 11 video works selected from Hungarian or Hungarian-born artists, including two videos of Szabolcs Kisspál, while omitting Péter Forgács, for instance?

KRH: We did not set quotas, although we were interested in representation. The attention to the transition (or results from transition) was considered first and foremost.

In my curatorial experience and understanding, Slovakian video art is not as highly plentiful as many of the other countries that also did not have high representation. There was no quota per country.

The work that was nominated by Peter Forgács was not on the topic of transition between 1989-2009, while the two works of Szabolcs Kisspál were, at least in the opinion of the majority of the jury.

RD: You divided the pieces of the video archive in your personal typography, in your essay of the accompanying reader, into four categories. What are they and what characterizes each of them?

KRH: After the selection was made, I needed a way personally to make some understanding of the works as a whole. It is not the only way that the works can be 'read' but it is one way that I find interesting. These are broad categories (for sure): performance, documentary, conceptual and artistic license (or you could also say experimental, but I included animation in this category because of the variety of styles). Many of the works can—of course—straddle more than one category, because they are artistic works and not created by formula. I relied on my personal reaction to each work, what was the strength of the work, in order to compare and contrast with other works. This is one manner of discussing artworks that is only one reading. I respect other readings and feel that an artistic work can have several stylistic and theoretical readings, interpretations, and responses.

RD: Why do you think video is an unusually important medium concerning artistic reflection on transitions?

KRH: Video is one artistic strategy that can reflect on transition. It is a particularly valuable one, as it can document performance or be the vehicle for performance; it has a tradition to be a conceptual medium, and allows for narrative and a personal point of view. There is a longstanding history of artists' video, making it a respected artistic medium.

Video offers a wide audience to personal actions, experiences, stories, and observations.

Television played a large role in the information the world received about the transition, therefore to see personal points of view, alternative documentaries, opens new perspectives on the very important activities that transpired during the years 1989-2009.

There are many reasons that video is an important medium for reflecting on the transition. It's a big story, and this is one project that attempts to share the ideas and viewpoints of artists. It can not, of course, include every single work that deals with this topic, but hopefully they will all receive their due recognition in other exhibitions and projects.

Réka Deim: You were the coordinator of Transitland commissions and Berlin events from the side of transmediale festival. More precisely, what was the role of transmediale in the project?

Stephen Kovats: transmediale came in as a partner at the very end of the project to coordinate the commissions and present the project in Berlin. On behalf of transmediale I also participated in the selection committee for the archive, and made recommendations for works to be considered for inclusion.

RD: Besides the 95 selected videos, five newly commissioned video works were included in the Archive. What is the significance of this section?

SK: The project was conceived in such a way that it would give a review of work covering a broad range of practice from a broad background. As a special addendum to this, a call for new commissions was organized to look at the specific context of transformation in Central and Eastern Europe in the form of new work reflecting on this history.

RD: What was the selection procedure like? To what extent did you instruct the artists?

SK: The selection included an international call, with a jury session selecting works from among the entrants, as well as invitations to apply with proposals. The works were executed based on the artistic merit of the proposals, so transmediale's role was primarily organizational, although we did discuss certain content issues and provide feedback with some of the artists. The point

at which transmediale formally joined the project the commission process was well underway, as the project actually began two years ago.

RD: How do the newly commissioned videos fit in the conception of the Archive?

SK: They become unique stand alone works alongside the core body of selected videos, the only difference being that they additionally reflect on the context of the project and cultural scenario after 20 years of transformation as a whole.

Réka Deim: As director of Ludwig Museum–Museum of Contemporary Art, what is your motivation to take part in the project and to host an exhibition of the Transitland Archive?

Barnabás Bencsik: Ludwig Museum–Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest focuses strongly on Eastern and Central European Contemporary art. This focus manifests itself in our acquisition policy. This project–the publication of the book and the exhibition itself–emphasizes this Eastern European regional focus. I was also motivated by the fact that the project is the result of a wide-spanning international collaboration that is one of the top priorities in the strategy of the Museum. Because I consider international collaborations highly important and the most productive way of work, we integrated ACAX as a department of Ludwig Museum in 2008. I am proud that Ludwig and ACAX had a chance to participate in an undertaking that contributes to the research and contextualization of video art in the region.

Réka Deim: As project co-curators from the side of the ACAX | Agency for Contemporary Art Exchange you were responsible for publishing the Transitland reader. You joined in the project a year after it started and therefore you had to undertake a very tight work schedule for the process of producing the book. What motivated you to participate in the project under such conditions?

Rita Kálmán and Tijana Stepanovic: We immediately realized that participating in such an extensive project, which aims to fill a huge gap in the field of video art, is a great opportunity but also a great responsibility. To create an archive of video art of the past twenty years is a big challenge, but its importance helped us overcome all the difficulties. This is why we managed to create this publication of 310 pages that contains eighteen essays by distinguished art

professionals, six written especially for this book in half a year's time. The authors of these essays recognized the great challenge and were fully committed to the task. Our greatest help was the editor Edit András, whose highly professional, passionate, and devoted contribution made it possible to publish the book in November. We were also motivated by the fact that in making these video works widely accessible and researchable we were contributing to the process of establishing this relatively new medium for a broader audience.

RD: What is the main focus of your conception regarding the upcoming exhibition based on selections of the Transitland Archive to take place in the Ludwig Museum?

RK and TS: The thematic exhibition that opens in January 2010 in the Ludwig Museum won't be the representation of the archive, or a kind of sample of it, but a focused curatorial selection based on our specific interests. However, the whole extensive material of the archive will be available for research at the exhibition in jukeboxes. In this exhibition we focus on the region's socio-psychological processes, the mental aspects of the transformation, so we would like to get beyond the surface. For example the subject of national identity, crowd-psychology, the sources and dynamics of group conflicts, mechanisms of the subjective memory, and methods and strategies of constructing history. These are the layers that motivated us as curators. But the collection has several similarly adequate and relevant layers and we hope that our colleagues will feel motivated to create their own selection to show the layers they find important and present them in the framework of various exhibitions. This show will be a subjective interpretation of the region's transition period from the point of view of its socio-psychological processes, just as the archive is a subjective interpretation of the history of the recent twenty years. It is only one possible history of video art—a subjective selection even if more than fifty renowned professionals contributed to the project with advice and nominations. Therefore we hope that many curators will create their own versions, their subjective interpretations and selections.

Réka Deim: As editor of the publication *Transitland. Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989-2009*, what did you formulate as the main focus(es) on which the reader should place emphasis in regards to video art?

Edit András: There are vast numbers of books on the market with a focal point on video art. The scope of such surveys concentrates mostly on the geographical span of Western Europe and the United States, though the geopolitical field is rarely designated. Relatively little attention has been given to parallel practices in Central and Eastern Europe, especially not in reference books and volumes that are distributed outside the region. The aim of this collection of essays is to counter this lack of visibility of Central and Eastern European video art.

In the same way as the Transitland archival project, the book also concentrates strictly on video art; i.e., video films presented or screened within an art and exhibition context. It can be noted that video art in the region gradually broke out from the ghetto of experimental digital art, electronic art or media art, whatever its name, and became involved in the broader activity of local art scenes. The number of video installations and museum screenings has dramatically increased all over the region in the last ten years. One can witness a boom in the use of video technology even by artists with totally different backgrounds, education and training, which was not really the case in the early nineties. Of late, video art is discussed within the discourse of contemporary art, instead of forming a kind of separatist, exclusive discourse of media gurus, as the center of attention has shifted from the magic of the technology to the content and to the message. Art historians and art critics, not necessarily specialized in the (not-so-new-anymore) media, have begun to interpret video art. The list of the authors in this anthology intentionally reflects this change.

However, the book is not intended to function as an all-inclusive monograph on the video art of Central and Eastern Europe, nor does it seek to provide a comprehensive synthesis, or a survey of video art produced in each of the countries of the region. Transition and transformation are the two keywords for the volume, as the book, similarly to the archival project, focuses on videos that, in one way or another, reflect on the metamorphoses of the ex-East bloc. The reader argues for the enormous creative potential of video art of the last twenty years within post-Socialist conditions to be recognized beyond the geographical borders. The impetus to frame the book from a Central and Eastern European perspective was a strategic one. All in all, the anthology proposes possible ways of thinking through the contribution of video art to the cultural transformation of Central and Eastern Europe through a presentation of different practices.

RD: The 18 essays by distinguished art historians, curators, artists, and theoreticians provide selective analyses of different aspects of the archive. What principles were behind your compilation?

EA: Many scholars from the region, including myself, argue for locality and for the importance of comprehending the relevant context, and of revising superficial statements relying on good old Cold War clichés, always returning in mega-regional or sub-regional shows and in general statements on post-Socialist countries. To demonstrate the diverse and astonishingly multifaceted context and histories of different parts of the region, the selection attempts to shed light on every corner of the region. Nevertheless, not all countries could be represented in this anthology, given its limited scope. Instead, we intended, at least for all sub-regions, to find the specific momentum of one included country through close encounters with the scene via the art production. Thus, the authors and texts have been loosely chosen according to their geopolitical expertise. The sub-regions we focus on are: the Balkans, including ex-Yugoslavia; Central Europe; the successor states of the former Soviet Union; and the post-Soviet states such as the Baltic States and the countries of the Caucasus.

The variety of approaches in the book ranges from new theoretical concepts, via the correct outlining of unknown histories and events, to accounts of art practices or a deep analysis of just one single art piece. The common denominator of the diverse array of writings in this collection, however, is that they track specific features and the development of video art in different parts of the very diverse region, or shed light on some aspects of its expansion and power congruent with the vast cultural transformation. The volume offers selective analyses of different aspects, and an angle on the field observed, demonstrating its fecundity and vividness.

The texts vary significantly, reflecting very different attitudes and points of view on the video art of the various regions of the territory. The international group of contributors includes well-established names, like Svetlana Boym, Boris Buden, Boris Groys, and excellent writers with less international recognition but with great expertise in their field, as well as an emerging new generation of thinkers with striking insights. On dolphinspearlplay.com  you can play various interesting slot games for free!

One third of them—six essays—were commissioned especially for this volume (by Marina Grzanic, Zoran Eri?, Keiko Sei, Miklós Peternák, Boryana Dragoeva, and myself). The other essays were carefully researched and selected on the basis of how they reflect and resonate with our framework. They have already been published in art journals, anthologies or catalogues, mostly in hard to find local publications. Two of them were translated into English from local languages specifically for this anthology, and thus became available for the first time in English.

Budapest, November 2009

Réka Deim is an MA student majoring in Art History and English and American studies. Her research field is post-World War II Hungarian art. She recently curated an exhibition entitled Continuum (2009) and was editorial assistant on the publication *Transitland. Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989-2009*.



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