

# Ana Janevski et al, editors. Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology

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**Ana Janevski et al, editors. *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*.** Foreword by Glenn D. Lowry, The Museum of Modern Art, 2018. Distributed by Duke UP. Primary Documents 9. 408 pp. Illustrations. References. C-MAP network list. Index. \$40.00, paper.

**T**his richly illustrated critical anthology is a part of a series of documentary anthologies that was initiated by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 2002. It is the ninth volume in the series, and it addresses contemporary art practices and critical theory, focusing on Eastern and Central Europe. This book is a compilation of critical primary texts supported with secondary sources and includes newly commissioned interviews with artists, cultural activists, and philosophers and case-study exhibitions, curatorial statements, critical debates, and more, originally written in over a dozen languages and previously published in exhibition catalogues, journals, magazines, and elsewhere. The geographical region covered in this ambitious anthology stretches from the former East Germany to Romania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Poland, the Baltic counties, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Ukraine, and parts of Russia. The main purpose of this work is to explore how after 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall—the event that symbolizes the end of the socialist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe—the new geopolitical realities and the historical experience of socialism were reassessed and how they were reflected through the arts and art activism.

The volume consists of seven chapters incorporating seventy-five primary and secondary sources. Each chapter features an introductory essay written by an invited scholar that furnishes a theoretical background. One will also find in every chapter a summary of critical texts; these summaries have been penned by different members of the Central and Eastern European section of C-MAP (MoMA's Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives, a global program centred on art histories other than those of the United States and Western Europe). In addition, every chapter includes an interview with an artist or group of artists conducted by another C-MAP member. As the editors claim, most of the author-contributors in this volume “share the desire to contest the ecumenical version of Western modernity. In reclaiming their own histories, they offer new perspectives that underscore the significance of the socialist legacy (in particular ideas of collectivity and solidarity) as an intellectual and moral force in both local and global contexts” (12).

Chapter 1, titled “Reckoning with History” (16–63), explores the complexity of the term *Eastern Europe* and looks at the difference between Eastern European socialism and Soviet-style socialism. The critical texts focus on diverse types of engagement with history from the position of curators, artists, and art historians. They respond to an inquiry as to how the concepts of East and West “have inflected the evolving historiography as well

as practices of modern art” (22; Juliet Kinchin’s summary), and they treat the artists’ experiences prior to and after 1989. Chapter 2, titled “Exhibiting the ‘East’ since 1989” (64–131), analyzes international exhibits of Eastern and Central European art from 1990 and probes “the curatorial optic through which this geographical region is perceived” (67; Claire Bishop’s introduction). The critical texts present the debates and discourses surrounding these exhibits and art practices and investigate “what it means to be geographically defined, either locally or nationally, or through concepts of regionalism” (72; Christian Rattemeyer’s summary). Chapter 3, titled “Working in and on the Archive” (132–73), is about the involvement of artists in “*self-historicization*,” “*surveillance*” undertaken by the secret police in socialist regimes, and the “*utopian archives* that imagine art practices in inaccessible locations” (135–36; David Joselit’s introduction). The critical texts address how artists collected and documented art and materials ignored by the official institutions.

Chapter 4, called “After the Fall: Democracy and Its Discontents” (174–223; the title refers to Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, from 1930), is devoted to what occurred after the fall of Eastern European Communism in 1989. The introductory essay (by Boris Buden [177–79]) asserts that democracy along with capitalism “arrived in the East side by side” with “the privatization—mostly criminal—of former socialist property, which generated a new, powerful stage of postcommunist primitive accumulation with disastrous social and moral consequences” (179). The critical texts in this chapter reflect on how the Cold War was historicized in 2002–12, and they deal with the changing notions of democracy. Chapter 5, named “Maintaining the Social in Postsocialism: Activist Practices and Forms of Collectivity” (224–68), looks at art activism and discusses how the arts have intertwined with the economic and political fields. The texts in this chapter offer insights on how economic and political events and environments triggered art activism and how artists have aimed to influence politics through socially engaged art. Again, these texts “draw an unambiguous dichotomy between artists of the West, who have largely acknowledged commodification as not simply normal or inherent to the production and exchange of artworks but further crafted art specifically addressing this situation, directly against artists of the East, whose activist inclinations were constructed on tendencies of interventionist artistic and collective performative actions” (231; David Platzker’s summary). Chapter 6, titled “Deconstructing Gender Discourses” (270–335), reflects on the paradigms of economy and production and gender constructs in the capitalist West and socialist East. The critical texts examine the difference between eastern socialist feminism and its western counterpart and investigate “the slow absorption of feminist and queer theories into higher education and public debates in Central and Eastern Europe” and “the adaptability of these

Western-born theories to local histories and gender constructs" (278; Magdalena Moskalewicz's summary). Chapter 7, the final chapter, titled "In a Global World" (336–93), addresses the process of the decolonization of the former Eastern Bloc, which has been taking place since the collapse of the USSR and other regimes in 1991. Boris Groys's introductory essay (339–41) provides a distinction between post-colonialism and post-socialism. Groys explains that "postcolonial artists and intellectuals criticized Western dominance and exclusivity, but with the goal of expanding Western cultural institutions to include non-Western traditions and perspectives as well. On the contrary, the goal of the postcommunist Eastern European regimes was the total abolition of communism, and in many cases also the suppression of all forms of communist ideology" (340). The critical texts in this chapter examine the categorization of art tendencies in the light of globalization.

A specialist in Ukrainian post-socialist/post-Communist art will find a republication of Sven Spieker's 2008 article "The Big Archive" (148–54), which is partially devoted to Ilya Kabakov (see 148–50), and Groys's text "Back from the Future" (199–204; from 2003), which problematizes the difference between Eastern European and Western art. Oleksiy Radynski's article "Art and Antagonism, Here and Now" (257–60) is another reprinted article (from 2013), and it focuses solely on Ukraine. The author, who is a filmmaker and a participant of the Visual Culture Research Center in Kyiv, argues that the term *post-Soviet* in relation to Ukraine is a euphemism, and he offers the term *Capitalist Realism* instead (258). Radynski explains the contemporary art scene, art societies, and art production as follows: "Art, therefore, is subjected either to the rules of market economy or to the guidelines of cultural funding that represent the ongoing political agenda of neo-capitalism" (258). He envisions that the role of art and its institutions "as a result of recent 'cultural wars' may lead to the major shift in art's positioning in a current social antagonism. Rather than being a regime's servant or an extravagant outsider, art is becoming a sovereign player in the social field" (260). We are undeniably witnessing this almost ten years after these words were first published.

This ambitious anthology surveys and analyzes the major issues that contemporary Eastern European artists faced after 1989. The work is aimed at a very specific reader who is familiar with Eastern European art, art shows, and activism. This book can be used as an excellent resource in courses for graduate students of art history and visual culture. And it would indeed also satisfy a demanding general reader interested in Eastern and Central Europe and their cultural scenes.

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