Art Power

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The MIT Press Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England

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Beyond Diversity: Cultural Studies and Its Post-Communist Other

One can safely say that the cultural situation in the countries of post-Communist Eastern Europe is still a blind spot for contemporary cultural studies. Cultural studies has, that is, some fundamental difficulties in describing and theorizing the post-Communist condition. And, frankly, I do not believe that a simple adjustment of the theoretical framework and vocabulary of cultural studies to the realities of Eastern Europe—without reconsideration of some of the discipline's fundamental presuppositions—would be sufficient to enable its discourse to describe and discuss the post-Communist reality. I will now try to explain why such an adjustment seems to be so difficult.

The currently dominant theoretical discourse in the field of cultural studies has a tendency to see historical development as a road that brings the subject from the particular to the universal, from premodern closed communities, orders, hierarchies, traditions, and cultural identities toward the open space of universality, free communication, and citizenship in a democratic modern state. Contemporary cultural studies shares this image with the venerable tradition of the European Enlightenment—even if the former looks at this image in a different way and, accordingly, draws different conclusions from the analysis of this image. The central question that arises under these presuppositions is namely the following: How are we to deal with an individual person traveling along this road—here and now? The traditional answer of liberal political theory, which has its origins in French Enlightenment thought, is well known: the person on this road has to move forward as quickly as possible. And if we see that a certain person is not going fast enough—and maybe even takes a rest before moving ahead—then appropriate measures must be taken against this person, because such a person is holding up not only his or her own transition but also the transition of the whole of humankind to the state of universal freedom. And humankind cannot tolerate such slow movement because it wants to be free and democratic as soon as possible.

This is the origin of the liberal mode of coercion and violence in the name of democracy and freedom. And it is very much understandable that today's cultural studies wants to reject this kind of coercion and to defend the right of the individual subject to be slow, to be different, to bring his or her premodern cultural identity into the future as legitimate luggage that may not be confiscated. And, indeed, if the perfect, absolute democracy is not only unrealized, but also unrealizable, then the way that leads to it is an infinite one—and it makes no sense to force the homogeneity and universality of such an infinite future on the heterogeneous cultural identities here and now. Rather, it is better to appreciate diversity and difference, to be more interested in where the subject is coming from than in where he or she is going to. So we can say that the present strong interest in diversity and difference is dictated in the first place by certain moral and political considerations—namely, by the defense of the so-called underdeveloped cultures against their marginalization and suppression by the dominating modern states in the name of progress. The ideal of progress is not completely rejected by contemporary cultural thought. This thought, rather, strives to find a compromise between the requirements of modern uniform democratic order and the rights of premodern cultural identities situated within this general order.

But there is also one aspect in all this which I would like to stress. The discourse of diversity and difference presupposes a certain aesthetic choice—I mean here a purely aesthetic preference for the heterogeneous, for the mix, for the crossover. This aesthetic taste is, in fact, very much characteristic of the postmodern art of the late 1970s and '80s—that is, during the time that the discipline of cultural studies emerged and developed to its present form. This aesthetic taste is ostensibly very open, very inclusive—and in this sense also genuinely democratic. But, as we know, postmodern taste is by no means as tolerant as it seems to be at first glance. The postmodern aesthetic sensibility in fact rejects everything universal, uniform, repetitive, geometrical, minimalist, ascetic, monotonous, boring—everything gray, homogeneous, and reductionist. It dislikes Bauhaus, it dislikes the bureaucratic and the technical; the classical avant-garde is accepted now only on the condition that its universalist claims are rejected and it becomes a part of a general heterogeneous picture.

And, of course, the postmodern sensibility strongly dislikes—and *must* dislike—the gray, monotonous, uninspiring look of Communism. I believe

that this is, in fact, why the post-Communist world today remains a blind spot. Western spectators trained in certain aesthetics and conditioned by a certain artistic sensibility just do not want to look at the post-Communist world because they do not like what they see. The only things that contemporary Western spectators like about the post-Communist—or still Communist—East are things like Chinese pagodas, or old Russian churches, or Eastern European cities that look like direct throwbacks to the nineteenth century—all things that are non-Communist or pre-Communist, that look diverse and different in the generally accepted sense of these words and that fit well within the framework of the contemporary Western taste for heterogeneity. On the contrary, Communist aesthetics seems to be not different, not diverse, not regional, not colorful enough—and, therefore, confronts the dominating pluralist, postmodern Western taste with its universalist, uniform Other.

But if we now ask ourselves: What is the origin of this dominating postmodern taste for colorful diversity?—there is only one possible answer: the market. It is the taste *formed by* the contemporary market, and it is the taste *for* the market. In this respect, it must be recalled that the emergence of the taste for the diverse and the different was directly related to the emergence of globalized information, media, and entertainment markets in the 1970s and the expansion of these markets in the '80s and '90s. Every expanding market, as we know, produces diversification and differentiation of the commodities that are offered on this market. Therefore, I believe that the discourse and the politics of cultural diversity and difference cannot be seen and interpreted correctly without being related to the market-driven practice of cultural diversification and differentiation in the last decades of the twentieth century. This practice opened a third option for dealing with one's own cultural identity—beyond suppressing it or finding a representation for it in the context of existing political and cultural institutions. This third option is to sell, to commodify, to commercialize this cultural identity on the international media and touristic markets. It is this complicity between the discourse of cultural diversity and the diversification of cultural markets that makes a certain contemporary postmodern critical discourse so immediately plausible and, at the same time, so deeply ambiguous. Although extremely critical of the homogeneous space of the modern state and its institutions, it tends to be uncritical of contemporary heterogeneous market practices—at least, by not taking them seriously enough into consideration.

Listening to postmodern critical discourse, one has the impression of being confronted with a choice between a certain universal order incorporated by the modern state, on the one hand, and fragmented, disconnected, diverse "social realities" on the other. But, in fact, such diverse realities simply do not exist—and the choice is a completely illusory one. The apparently fragmented cultural realities are, in fact, implicitly connected by the globalized markets. There is no real choice between universality and diversity. Rather, there is a choice between two different types of universality: between the universal validity of a certain political idea and the universal accessibility obtained through the contemporary market. Both—the modern state and the contemporary market—are equally universal. But the universality of a political idea is an openly manifested, articulated, visualized universality that demonstrates itself immediately by the uniformity and repetitiveness of its external image. On the other hand, the universality of the market is a hidden, nonexplicit, nonvisualized universality that is obscured by commodified diversity and difference.

So we can say that postmodern cultural diversity is merely a pseudonym for the universality of capitalist markets. The universal accessibility of heterogeneous cultural products which is guaranteed by the globalization of contemporary information markets has replaced the universal and homogeneous political projects of the European past—from the Enlightenment to Communism. In the past, to be universal was to invent an idea or an artistic project that could unite people of different backgrounds, that could transcend the diversity of their already existing cultural identities, that could be joined by everybody—if he or she would decide to join them. This notion of universality was linked to the concept of inner change, of inner rupture, of rejecting the past and embracing the future, to the notion of *metanoia*—of transition from an old identity to a new one. Today, however, to be universal means to be able to aetheticize one's identity as it is—without any attempt to change it. Accordingly, this already existing identity is treated as a kind of readymade in the universal context of diversity. Under this condition, becoming universal, abstract, uniform makes you aesthetically unattractive and commercially inoperative. As I have already said, for contemporary tastes, the universal looks too gray, boring, unspectacular, unentertaining, uncool to be aesthetically seductive.

And that is why the postmodern taste is fundamentally an antiradical taste. Radical political aesthetics situates itself always at the "degree zero" (*degré zéro*) of literary and visual rhetoric, as Roland Barthes defined it[1]—and that means also at the degree zero of diversity and difference. And this is also why the artistic avant-garde—Bauhaus, and so on—seem to be so outmoded today: These artistic movements embody an aesthetic sensibility for the political, not for the commercial market. There can be no doubt about it: every utopian, radical taste is a taste for the ascetic, uniform, monotonous, gray, and boring. From Plato to the utopias of the Renaissance to the modern, avant-garde utopias—all radical political and aesthetic projects presented themselves always at the degree zero of diversity. And that means: One needs to have a certain aesthetic preference for the uniform—as opposed to the diverse—to be ready to accept and to endorse radical political and artistic projects. This kind of taste must be, obviously, very unpopular, very unappealing to the masses. And that is one of the sources of the paradox that is well known to the historians of modern utopias and radical politics. On the one hand, these politics are truly democratic because they are truly universal, truly open to all—they are by no means elitist or exclusive. But, on the other hand, they appeal, as I said, to an aesthetic taste that is relatively rare. That is why radical democratic politics presents itself often enough as exclusive, as elitist. One must be committed to radical aesthetics to accept radical politics—and this sense of commitment produces relatively closed communities united by an identical project, by an identical vision, by an identical historical goal. The way of radical art and politics does not take us from closed premodern communities to open societies and markets. Rather, it takes us from relatively open societies to closed communities based on common commitments.

We know from the history of literature that all past utopias were situated on remote islands or inaccessible mountains. And we know how isolated, how closed the avant-garde movements were—even if their artistic programs were genuinely open. Thus we have here a paradox of a universalist but closed community or movement—a paradox which is truly modern. And that means, in the case of radical political and artistic programs, we have to travel a different historical road than the one described by standard cultural studies: It is not a road from a premodern community to an open society of universal

communication. Rather, it is a road from open and diverse markets toward utopian communities based on a common commitment to a certain radical project. These artificial, utopian communities are not based on the historical past; they are not interested in preserving its traces, in continuing a tradition. On the contrary, these universalist communities are based on historical rupture, on the rejection of diversity and difference in the name of a common cause.

On the political and economic level, the October Revolution effectuated precisely such a complete break with the past, such an absolute destruction of every individual's heritage. This break with every kind of heritage was introduced by the Soviet power on the practical level by abolishing private property and transferring every individual's inheritance into the collective property. Finding a trace of one's own heritage in this undifferentiated mass of collective property has become as impossible as tracing the individual incinerated objects in the collective mass of ashes. This complete break with the past constitutes the political as well as the artistic avant-garde. The notion of the avant-garde is often associated with the notion of progress. In fact, the term "avant-garde" suggests such an interpretation because of its military connotations—initially, it referred to the troops advancing at the head of an army. But to Russian revolutionary art, this notion began to be applied habitually since the 1960s.

The Russian artists themselves never used the term avant-garde. Instead, they used names like Futurism, Suprematism, or Constructivism—meaning not moving progressively toward the future but being already situated in the future because the radical break with the past had already taken place, being at the end—or even beyond the end—of history, understood in Marxist terms as a history of class struggle, or as a history of different art forms, different art styles, different art movements. Malevich's famous *Black Square*, in particular, was understood as the degree zero both of art and of life—and because of that, as the point of identity between life and art, between artist and artwork, between spectator and art object, and so on.

The end of history is understood here not in the same way as Francis Fukuyama understands it.[2] The end of history is brought about not by the final victory of the market over every possible universal political project but, on the contrary, by the ultimate victory of a political project, which means an ultimate rejection of the past, a final rupture with the history of diversity.

It is the radical, the apocalyptic end of history—not the kind of end-of-history as is described by contemporary liberal theory. That is why the only real heritage of today's post-Communist subject—its real place of origin—is the complete destruction of every kind of heritage, a radical, absolute break with the historical past and with any kind of distinct cultural identity. Even the name of the country "Russia" was erased and substituted by a neutral name lacking any cultural tradition: Soviet Union. The contemporary Russian, post-Soviet citizen thus comes from nowhere, from the degree zero at the end of every possible history.

Now it becomes clear why it is so difficult for cultural studies to describe the way that post-Communist countries and populations evolved after the demise of Communism. On the one hand, this path of evolution seems to be the familiar, well-worn path from a closed society to an open society, from the community to a civil society. But the Communist community was in many ways much more radically modern in its rejection of the past than the countries of the West. And this community was closed not because of the stability of its traditions but because of the radicality of its projects. And that means: the post-Communist subject travels the same route as described by the dominating discourse of cultural studies—but he or she travels this route in the opposite direction, not from the past to the future, but from the future to the past; from the end of history, from posthistorical, postapocalyptic time, back to historical time. Post-Communist life is life lived backward, a movement against the flow of time. It is, of course, not a completely unique historical experience. We know of many modern apocalyptic, prophetic, religious communities which were subjected to the necessity of going back in historical time. The same can be said of some artistic avant-garde movements, and also of some politically motivated communities that arose in the 1960s. The chief difference is the magnitude of a country like Russia, which must now make its way back—from the future to the past. But it is an important difference. Many apocalyptic sects have committed collective suicide because they were incapable of going back in time. But such a huge country as Russia does not have the option of suicide—it has to proceed backward whatever collective feelings it has about it.

It goes without saying that the opening of the Communist countries has meant for their populations, in the first place, not democratization in political terms but the sudden necessity of surviving under new economic

pressures dictated by international markets. And this also means a return to the past, because all Communist countries of Eastern Europe, including Russia, had their capitalist past. But until very recently, the only acquaintance most of the Russian population had with capitalism was mainly via pre-revolutionary, nineteenth-century Russian literature. The sum of what people knew about banks, loans, insurance policies, or privately owned companies was gleaned from reading Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Chekhov at school—leaving impressions not unlike what people often feel when they read about ancient Egypt. Of course, everyone was aware that the West was still a capitalist system; yet they were equally aware that they themselves were not living in the West, but in the Soviet Union. Then suddenly all these banks, loans, and insurance policies began to sprout up from their literary graves and become reality; so for ordinary Russians it feels now as if the ancient Egyptian mummies had risen from their tombs and were now reinstituting all their old laws.

Beyond that—and this is, probably, the worst part of the story—the contemporary Western cultural markets, as well as contemporary cultural studies, require that the Russians, Ukrainians, and so on rediscover, redefine, and manifest their alleged cultural identity. They are required to demonstrate, for example, their specific Russianness or Ukrainness, which, as I have tried to show, these post-Communist subjects do not have and cannot have because even if such cultural identities ever really existed they were completely erased by the universalist Soviet social experiment. The uniqueness of Communism lies in the fact that it is the first modern civilization that has historically perished—with the exception, perhaps, of the short-lived Fascist regimes of the 1930s and '40s. Until that time, all other civilizations that had perished were premodern; therefore they still had fixed identities that could be documented by a few outstanding monuments like the Egyptian pyramids. But the Communist civilization used only those things that are modern and used by everyone—and, in fact, non-Russian in origin. The typical Soviet emblem was Soviet Marxism. But it makes no sense to present Marxism to the West as a sign of Russian cultural identity because Marxism has, obviously, Western and not Russian origins. The specific Soviet meaning and use of Marxism could function and be demonstrated only in the specific context of the Soviet state. Now that this specific context has dissolved, Marxism has returned to the West—and the traces of its Soviet use have simply disappeared. The post-

Communist subject must feel like a Warhol Coca-Cola bottle brought back from the museum into the supermarket. In the museum, this Coca-Cola bottle was an artwork and had an identity—but back in the supermarket the same Coca-Cola bottle looks just like every other Coca-Cola bottle. Unfortunately, this complete break with the historical past and the resultant erasure of cultural identity are as difficult to explain to the outside world as it is to describe the experience of war or prison to someone who has never been at war or in prison. And that is why, instead of trying to explain his or her lack of cultural identity, the post-Communist subject tries to invent one—acting like Zelig in the famous Woody Allen movie.

This post-Communist quest for a cultural identity that seems to be so violent, authentic, and internally driven is, actually, a hysterical reaction to the requirements of international cultural markets. Eastern Europeans want now to be as nationalistic, as traditional, as culturally identifiable as all the others—but they still do not know how to do this. Therefore, their apparent nationalism is primarily a reflection of and an accommodation to the quest for otherness that is characteristic of the cultural taste of the contemporary West. Ironically, this accommodation to the present international market requirements and dominating cultural taste is mostly interpreted by Western public opinion as a "rebirth" of nationalism, a "return of the repressed," as additional proof corroborating the current belief in otherness and diversity. A good example of this mirror effect—the East reflecting Western expectations of "otherness" and confirming them by artificially simulating its cultural identity—is the reshaping of Moscow's architecture that took place almost immediately after the demise of the Soviet Union.

In the relatively brief period since the Soviet Union was disbanded, Moscow—once the Soviet, now the Russian capital—has already undergone an astonishingly rapid and thorough architectural transformation. A lot has been built in this short time, and the newly constructed buildings and monuments have redefined the face of the city. The question surely is, in what manner? The answer most frequently advanced in texts by Western observers and in some quarters of today's more earnest Russian architectural criticism is that Moscow's architecture is kitschy, restorative, and above all eager to appeal to regressive Russian nationalist sentiments. In the same breath, these commentators claim to make out a certain discrepancy between Russia's embrace of capitalism and the regressive, restorative aesthetics now evident

in the Russian capital. The reason most often provided for this alleged contradiction is that, in view of the current wave of modernization and the host of economic and social pressures brought in its wake, these restorative aesthetics are intended as a compensatory measure through their evocation of Russia's past glory.

Without question, the aesthetic profile of contemporary Moscow is unambiguously restorative; although one encounters a few borrowings from contemporary Western architecture, these references are always situated in a historicist, eclectic context. In particular, the most representative buildings of Moscow's new architecture are those that signal a programmatic rejection of the contemporary international idiom. Yet in Russia, as was already mentioned, capitalism is already experienced as restorative, that is, as the return from the country's socialist future back to its pre-revolutionary, capitalist past. This in turn means that, rather than contradicting it, restorative architecture is actually complicit with the spirit of Russian capitalism. According to Russian chronology, modernism is a feature of the Socialist future, which now belongs to the past, rather than being part of the capitalist past, which is now the future. In Russia, modernism is associated with Socialism—and not, as it is in the West, with progressive capitalism. This is not merely because modernist artists often voiced Socialist views, but also a result of modernism's concurrence with a period when Socialism prevailed in Russia—which means, in fact, with the entire twentieth century. That is why the new Moscow architecture wants to signal the return of the country to pre-revolutionary times, for example, to the nineteenth century, by abandoning the modernism of the twentieth century.

Furthermore, Russians associate modernism above all with Soviet architecture of the 1960s and '70s, which by and large they utterly detested. During these decades, vast urban zones sprung up all over the Soviet Union, stocked with enormous, highly geometrical, standardized residential buildings of a gray and monotonous appearance and entirely bereft of artistic flair. This was architecture at the bottom line. Modernism in this guise is now spurned since it is felt to combine monotony and standardization and embody Socialism's characteristic disregard for personal taste. As it happens, similar arguments can be heard today in a like-minded rejection of the oppositional and modernistically inclined dissident culture of the 1960s and '70s, whose proponents nowadays find approval for the most part

only in the West. In Russia, the former dissident culture is dismissed for still being "too Soviet"—in other words, for being too arrogant, intolerant, doctrinaire, and modernist. Instead, the current *cause célèbre* in Russia is postmodernism. Thus, the postmodernist return of nineteenth-century eclecticism and historicism is currently celebrated in Russia as signaling the advent of true pluralism, openness, democracy, and the right to personal taste—as the immediate visual confirmation that the Russian people feel liberated at last from the moralistic sermons of Communist ideology and the aesthetic terror of modernism.

But, contrary to this rhetoric of diversity, inclusiveness, and liberation of personal taste, the new Moscow style is, in fact, wholly the product of centralized planning. Today's most representative and stylistically influential buildings have come about on the initiative of the post-Soviet mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov, and his preferred sculptor, Zurab Tsereteli. As was also the case with Stalinist architecture, which likewise was the result of close cooperation between Stalin and a small coterie of carefully appointed architects, this is an example of a most typically Russian phenomenon—a case, namely, of planned and centralized pluralism. The current Moscow style has distanced itself from the modernist monotony of the 1960s and '70s to the same degree as Stalinist architecture was divesting itself of the rigorism of the Russian avant-garde. The Moscow style is a revival of a revival. But most importantly, this return to popular taste and aesthetic pluralism in both cases ultimately proved to be a state-sponsored *mise-en-scène*.

The way this kind of controlled pluralism functions is well illustrated by a concrete example, the reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in the center of Moscow, a project which was just recently completed. This rebuilt cathedral is already counted as the most important post-Soviet architectural monument in Moscow today. More than anyone else, Luzhkov has prioritized the reconstruction of the cathedral as the city's most prestigious project. A few historical details should shed light on the implications of this restoration project.

The original Cathedral of Christ the Savior was built by the architect Konstantin Ton between 1838 and 1860 as a symbol of Russia's victory over the Napoleonic army; it was demolished on Stalin's orders in 1931. Immediately after its completion, the disproportionately huge cathedral was roundly criticized and ridiculed as monumental kitsch. This original view was shared

by all subsequent architectural opinion, which was probably a further reason for the later decision to blow it up—it simply was deemed to be of little artistic value. At the same time, this demolition amounted to an intensely symbolic political act, since in spite of—or rather precisely due to—its kitschy character, the cathedral was immensely popular with the people, as well as being the most vivid expression of the power held by the Russian Orthodox Church in pre-revolutionary Russia. Hence its demolition came as the climax of the anticlerical campaign being waged in the late 1920s and '30s, which is why it has left such an indelible trace on popular memory.

Given its symbolic status, Stalin designed the square that had been cleared by the cathedral's demolition to be a site for the construction of the Palace of the Soviets, which was envisaged as the paramount monument to Soviet Communism. The Palace of the Soviets was never built—just as the Communist future that it was meant to commemorate was never realized. Yet the design of the palace, drafted by Boris Iofan in the mid-1930s and, only after numerous revisions, approved by Stalin, is still regarded—justly—as the most notable architectural project of the Stalin era. For although the Palace of the Soviets was never actually erected, the project itself served as a prototype for all Stalinist architecture thereafter. This is particularly conspicuous in the notorious Stalinist skyscrapers built in the postwar years that even now largely dominate Moscow's skyline. Just as official ideology at that time claimed that Communism was being prepared and prefigured by Stalinist culture, Stalin's skyscrapers were assembled around the nonexistent Palace of the Soviets in order to herald its advent. However, in the course of de-Stalinization during the 1960s, this locale was given over to build a gigantic open-air swimming pool, the Moskva, in lieu of the palace; and, like the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, it subsequently enjoyed enormous popularity. The pool was kept open even in the winter; and for several months each year vast clouds of steam could be seen from all around, lending the entire prospect the air of a subterranean hell. But this pool can also be viewed as a place where Moscow's population could cleanse themselves of the sins of their Stalinist past. One way or another, it is precisely its memorable location that makes this swimming pool the most dramatic embodiment of the "modernist" cultural consciousness of the 1960s and '70s: It represents a radical renunciation of any type of architectural style, it is like swimming free beneath a clear sky, the "degree zero" of architecture.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the swimming pool was emptied and replaced by an exact replica of the demolished Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Just how true to the original this copy in fact is has become a highly debated and contentious issue in Russia. But ultimately, all that counts is the underlying intention, which unquestionably is to construct the nearest possible replica of the demolished church—which functions symbolically as an exact copy of the historical past, of Russian cultural identity. Far from being a monument to the new Russian nationalism or a symptom of the resurrection of anti-Western sentiment, the rebuilding of the cathedral was designed to celebrate the defeat of the Soviet universalist, modernist, avant-garde past and the return to the folkloristic Russian identity, an identity that can be easily inscribed in the new capitalist international order. And at first glance, such a symbolic return to national identity seems to be especially smooth in this case: during the entire Soviet period, the site of the cathedral remained, as I said, a void, a blank space—like a white sheet of paper that could be filled with every kind of writing. Accordingly, to reconstruct the old cathedral on its former site, there was no need to remove, to destroy any existing buildings. The Soviet time manifests itself here as an ecstatic interruption of historical time, as a pure absence, as materialized nothingness, as a void, a blank space. So it seems that if this void disappears, nothing will be changed: the deletion will be deleted, and a copy will become identical with the original—without any additional historical losses.

But in fact, this reconstruction demonstrates that the movement to the past—as, earlier, the movement to the future—only brings the country again and again to the same spot. And this spot, this point from which the panorama of Russian history can be seen in its entirety has a name: Stalinism. The culture at the time of Stalin was already an attempt to reappropriate the past after a complete revolutionary break with it—to find in the historical garbage pit left behind by the Revolution certain things that could be useful for the construction of the new world after the end of history. The key principle of Stalinist dialectical materialism, which was developed and sealed in the mid-1930s, is embodied in the so-called *law of the unity and the struggle of opposites*. According to this principle, two contradictory statements can be simultaneously valid. Far from being mutually exclusive, "A" and "not A" must be engaged in a dynamic relationship: in its inner structure, a logical contradiction reflects the real conflict between antagonistic historical forces,

which is what constitutes the vitally dynamic core of life. Thus, only statements that harbor inner contradictions are deemed "vital" and hence true. That is why Stalin-era thinking automatically championed contradiction to the detriment of the consistent statement.

Such great emphasis on contradictoriness was of course a legacy dialectical materialism had inherited from Hegel's dialectic. Yet in the Leninist-Stalinist model, as opposed to Hegel's postulates, this contradiction could never be historically transcended and retrospectively examined. All contradictions were constantly at play, remained constantly at variance with one another, and constantly made up a unified whole. Rigid insistence on a single chosen assertion was counted as a crime, as a perfidious assault on this unity of opposites. The doctrine of the unity and the struggle of opposites constitutes the underlying motif and the inner mystery of Stalinist totalitarianism—for this variant of totalitarianism lays claim to unifying absolutely all conceivable contradictions. Stalinism rejects nothing: it takes everything into its embrace and assigns to everything the position it deserves. The only issue that the Stalinist mindset finds utterly intolerable is an intransigent adherence to the logical consistency of one's own argument to the exclusion of any contrary position. In such an attitude, Stalinist ideology sees a refusal of responsibility toward life and the collective, an attitude that could only be dictated by malicious intentions. The basic strategy of this ideology can be said to operate in the following manner: If Stalinism has already managed to unite all contradictions under the sheltering roof of its own thinking, what could be the point of partisanly advocating just one of these various contrary positions? There can ultimately be no rational explanation for such behavior, since the position in question is already well looked after within the totality of Stalinist ideology. The sole reason for such a stubborn act of defiance must consequently lie in an irrational hatred of the Soviet Union and a personal resentment of Stalin. Since it is impossible to reason with someone so full of hatred, regrettably the only remedy available is reeducation or elimination.

This brief detour into the doctrine of Stalinist dialectical materialism allows us to formulate the criterion that intrinsically determined all artistic creativity during the Stalin era: Namely, each work of art endeavored to incorporate a maximum of inner aesthetic contradictions. This same criterion also informed the strategies of art criticism in that period, which always

reacted allergically whenever a work of art was found to be expressing a clearly defined, consistently articulated, and unambiguously identifiable aesthetic position—the actual nature of this position was considered secondary. Contrary to the explicit and aggressive aesthetics of the artistic avant-garde, the aesthetic of the Stalin era never defined itself in positive terms. Neither Stalinist ideology nor Stalinist art politics is in any sense "dogmatic." Rather, Stalinist state power acts as an invisible hand behind the heterogeneity, diversity, and plurality of individual artistic projects—censoring, editing, and combining these projects according to its own vision of the ideologically appropriate mix. This means that the symbolic void on which the new-old cathedral was built is not such a blank space after all. It is an invisible, internal space of power hidden behind the diversity of artistic forms. That is why, in the present context, it became so easy to coordinate—if not to identify—this invisible hand of Stalinist state power with the invisible hand of the market. Both operate in the same space behind the diverse, heterogeneous, pluralistic surface. Far from signifying a rebirth of Russian cultural identity, the cathedral's copy in the center of Moscow symbolizes a revival of Stalinist cultural practices under the new market conditions.

This example of the revival of Soviet Stalinist aesthetics as an effect of postmodern taste, which I have tried to elaborate at some length, illustrates a certain point on the relationship between art and politics. Art is, of course, political. All attempts to define art as autonomous and to situate it above or beyond the political field are utterly naive. But having said that, we should not forget that art cannot be reduced to a specific field among many other fields that function as arenas for political decisions. It is not enough to say that art is dependent on politics; it is more important to thematicize the dependence of political discourses, strategies, and decisions on aesthetic attitudes, tastes, preferences, and predispositions. As I have tried to show, radical politics cannot be dissociated from a certain aesthetic taste—the taste for the universal, for the degree zero of diversity. On the other hand, liberal, market-oriented politics is correlated with the preference for diversity, difference, openness, and heterogeneity. Today, the postmodern taste still prevails. Radical political projects have almost no chance today of being accepted by the public because they do not correlate with the dominant aesthetic sensibility. But the times are changing. And it is very possible that in the near future a new sensibility for radical art and politics will emerge again.

Privatizations, or Artificial Paradises of Post-Communism

The term that without a doubt best characterizes the processes that have been taking place since the abdication of the Communist regime in Russia, and in Eastern Europe generally, is *privatization.* The complete abolition of private ownership of the means of production was seen by the theoreticians and practitioners of Russian Bolshevism as the crucial prerequisite to building first a Socialist and later a Communist society. Total nationalization of all private property was the only thing that could achieve the total social plasticity that the Communist Party needed to obtain a completely new, unprecedented power to form society. Above all, however, this meant that art was given primacy over nature—over human nature and over nature generally. Only when the "natural rights" of humanity, including the right to private property, were abolished, and the "natural" connections to origin, heritage, and one's "own" cultural tradition severed, could people invent themselves in a completely free and new way. Only someone who no longer has property is free and available for every social experiment. The abolition of private property thus represents the transition from the natural to the artificial, from the realm of necessity to the realm of (political and artistic) freedom, from the traditional state to the *Gesamtkunstwerk.* The great utopians of history, such as Plato, More, and Campanella, had viewed the abolition of private property and associated private interests as a necessary prerequisite for the unconstrained pursuit of a collective political project.

The reintroduction of private property thus represents an equally crucial prerequisite for putting an end to the Communist experiment. The disappearance of a Communist-run state is thus not merely a political event. We know from history that governments, political systems, and power relations have often changed without having substantial effects on private ownership rights. In such cases, social and economic life continued to be structured according to civil law even as political life was being radically transformed. With the fall of the Soviet Union, by contrast, there was no longer a valid social contract. Enormous territories became abandoned wildernesses as far

as rights were concerned—as in the Wild West era in the United States—and had to be restructured. That is to say, they had to be parceled, distributed, and opened up to privatization, following rules that neither existed nor could exist. The process of de-Communization of the formerly Communist Eastern European countries may thus be seen as a drama of privatization that naturally played out beyond all the usual conventions of civilization. It is well known that this drama kindled many passions and produced many victims. Human nature, which had previously been suppressed, manifested itself as raw violence in the struggle over the private acquisition of collective assets.

This struggle should not, however, be understood as simply a transition that leads (back) from a society without private property to a society with private property. Ultimately, privatization proves to be just as much an artificial political construct as nationalization had been. The same state that had once nationalized in order to build up Communism is now privatizing in order to build up capitalism. In both cases private property is subordinated to the *raison d'état* to the same degree—and in this way it manifests itself as an artifact, as a product of state planning. Privatization as a (re)introduction of private property does not, therefore, lead back to nature—to natural law. The post-Communist state is, like its Communist predecessor, a kind of artistic installation. Hence the post-Communist situation is one that reveals the artificiality of capitalism by presenting the emergence of capitalism as a purely political project of social restructuring (in Russian: *perestroika*) and not as the result of a "natural" process of economic development. The establishment of capitalism in Eastern Europe, including Russia, was indeed neither a consequence of economic necessity nor one of gradual and "organic" historical transition. Rather, a political decision was made to switch from building up Communism to building up capitalism, and to that end (in complete harmony with classical Marxism) to produce artificially a class of private property owners who would become the principal protagonists of this process. Thus there was no return to the market as a "state of nature" but rather a revelation of the highly artificial character of the market itself.

For that reason, too, privatization is not a transition but a permanent state, since it is precisely through the process of privatization that the private discovers its fatal dependence on the state: private spaces are necessarily

formed from the remnants of the state monster. It is a violent dismemberment and private appropriation of the dead body of the Socialist state, both of which recall sacred feasts of the past in which members of a tribe would consume a totem animal together. On the one hand, such a feast represents a privatization of the totem animal, since everyone received a small, private piece of it; on the other, however, the justification for the feast was precisely a creation of the supraindividual identity of the tribe.

This common identity that makes it possible to experience privatization as a collective project is manifested particularly clearly in the art that is being produced in post-Communist countries today. First of all, every artist in any area once under Communism still finds him- or herself under the shadow of the state art that has just gone under. It is not easy for an artist today to compete with Stalin, Ceausescu, or Tito—just as it is probably difficult for Egyptian artists, now as much as ever, to compete with the pyramids. Moreover, collective property under the conditions of "real Socialism" went along with a large reservoir of collective experiences. This is because the numerous political measures undertaken by the Socialist state to shape the population into a new Communist humanity affected this population as a whole. The result was a collective mental territory whose sovereign was the state. Under the rule of the Communist Party every private psyche was subordinated to and nationalized by the official ideology. Just as the Socialist state at its demise made an immense economic area available to private appropriation, so did the simultaneous abolition of official Soviet ideology leave as its legacy the enormous empire of collective emotions that was made available for private appropriation for the purposes of producing an individualist, capitalist soul. For artists today this represents a great opportunity, for when they enter this territory of collective experiences, they are immediately understood by their public. But it also conceals a great risk, since the artistic privatization proves to be as incomplete and as dependent on commonality now as much as ever.

Be that as it may, however, today's post-Communist art is produced largely by means of the privatization of the mental and symbolic territory that has been left behind by the Soviet ideology. Admittedly, it is not unlike the Western art of postmodernism in this respect; for appropriation or, if you will, privatization, continues to function as the leading artistic method in the context of international contemporary art. Most artists today appropriate

various historical styles, religious or ideological symbols, mass-produced commodities, widespread advertising, but also the works of certain famous artists. The art of appropriation sees itself as art after the end of history: It is no longer about the individual production of the new but about the struggles of distribution, about the debate over property rights, about the individual's opportunity to accumulate private symbolic capital. All of the images, objects, symbols, and styles appropriated by Western art today originally circulated as commodities on a market that has always been dominated by private interests. Hence in this context appropriative art seems aggressive and subversive—a kind of symbolic piracy that moves along the border between the permitted and the prohibited and explores the redistribution of capital—at least of symbolic capital, if not real capital.

Post-Communist art, by contrast, appropriates from the enormous store of images, symbols, and texts that no longer belong to anyone, and that no longer circulate but merely lie quietly on the garbage heap of history as a shared legacy from the days of Communism. Post-Communist art has passed through its own end of history: not the free-market and capitalist end of history but the Socialist and Stalinist end of history. The true impudence of real Socialism in its Stalinist form, after all, was its assertion that the Soviet Union marked the historical end of the class struggle, of the revolution, and even of all forms of social criticism—that the salvation from the hell of exploitation and war had already occurred. The real circumstances in the Soviet Union were proclaimed to be identical with the ideal circumstances after the final victory of good over evil. The real location in which the Socialist camp had established itself was decreed the site of utopia realized. It requires—and even then it required—no great effort or insight to demonstrate that this was a counterfactual assertion, that the official idyll was manipulated by the state, that the struggle continued, whether it was a struggle for one's own survival, a struggle against repression and manipulation, or the struggle of permanent revolution.

And nevertheless, it would be just as impossible to banish the famous assertion "It is fulfilled" from the world simply by pointing to world's actual injustices and inadequacies. One speaks of the end of history, that is, of the identity between anti-utopia and utopia, of hell and paradise, of damnation and salvation, when one chooses the present over the future because one believes that the future will no longer bring anything new beyond what one

has already seen in the past. Above all, one believes it when one witnesses an image or an event that one assumes is of such incomparable radicalness that it can at most be repeated but never surpassed. This may be an image of Christ on the cross, of Buddha beneath the tree, or, in Hegel's case, Napoleon on a horse. However, it could also be the experience of the Stalinist state—of the state that created the most radical form of expropriation, of terror, of total equality, because it was directed against everyone equally. This was precisely the argument of Alexandre Kojève's famous Parisian lectures in the 1930s on Hegel's philosophy of history, as he explicitly declared Stalinism to be the end of history. In the postwar period Kojève's successors began to speak again of the end of history, or *post-histoire* and postmodernism. This time, however, it was no longer Stalinism but the victory of free-market capitalism in the Second World War and later in the cold war that would usher in the final stage of history. And once again the attempt was made to refute the discourse about the end of history by pointing to the continuing progress of history in actuality. But the choice of the present over the future cannot be refuted by factual arguments, since that choice takes both the factual and all arguments that refer to the factual to be merely the eternal recurrence of the same—and hence of that which has been already overcome historically. There is nothing easier than to say that the struggle goes on, since this is obviously the truth of healthy human reason. It is more difficult to recognize that those involved in the struggle are in fact not struggling at all but have simply ossified in battle position.

Thus post-Communist art is an art that passed from one state after the end of history into the other state after the end of history: from real Socialism into postmodern capitalism; or, from the idyll of universal expropriation following the end of the class struggle into the ultimate resignation with respect to the depressing infinity in which the same struggles for distribution, appropriation, and privatization are permanently repeated. Western postmodern art, which reflects on this infinity and at the same time savors it, sometimes wants to appear combative, sometimes cynical, but in any case it wants to be critical. Post-Communist art, by contrast, proves to be deeply anchored in the Communist idyll—it privatizes and expands this idyll rather than renouncing it. That is why post-Communist art frequently seems too harmless, that is, not critical or radical enough. And indeed it pursues the utopian logic of inclusion, not the realist logic of exclusion, struggle, and criticism. It

amounts to an extension of the logic of Communist ideology, which sought to be universalist and strove toward dialectical unity of all oppositions but ultimately remained stuck in the confrontations of the cold war because it resisted all symbols of Western capitalism. The independent, unofficial art of late Socialism wanted to think through the end of history more rigorously and to expand the utopia of the peaceful coexistence of all nations, cultures, and ideologies both to the capitalist West and to the pre-Communist history of the past.

Russians artists from the 1960s and 1970s, such as Vitali Komar and Alexander Melamid, and later the Slovenian artists' group Irwin or the Czech artist Milan Kunc, pursued this strategy of rigorous inclusion. They created spaces of an artistic idyll in which symbols, images, and texts perceived as irreconcilable in the political reality of the cold war could live in peaceful coexistence. Also as early as the 1960s and 1970s other artists, such as Ilya Kabakov or Erik Bulatov, mixed gloomy images of daily life in the Soviet Union with the cheerful images of official propaganda. The artistic strategies of ideological reconciliation beyond the trenches of the cold war announced at that time an extended and radicalized utopia that was intended to include their enemies as well. This politics of inclusion was pursued by many Russian and Eastern European artists even after the break up of the Communist regime. One might say that it is the extension of the paradise of real Socialism in which everything is accepted that had previously been excluded, and hence it is a utopian radicalization of the Communist demand for the total inclusion of one and all, including those who are generally considered dictators, tyrants, and terrorists but also capitalists, militarists, and the profiteers of globalization. This kind of radicalized utopian inclusivity was often misunderstood as irony, but it is rather a posthistorical idyll that sought analogies instead of differences.

Even post-Communist poverty is depicted as utopian by today's Russian artists, because poverty unites whereas wealth divides. Boris Mikhailov in particular depicts everyday life in Russia and the Ukraine in a way that is both unsparing and loving. The same idyllic note is perceived clearly in the videos of Olga Chernyshova, Dmitri Gutov, and Lyudmila Gorlova; for these artists, utopia lives on in the daily routine of post-Communism, even if officially it has been replaced by capitalist competition. The gesture of collective

political protest, by contrast, is presented as an artistic theatricalization that no longer has a place in the indifferent, utterly privatized daily life of post-Communism. For example, in a performance by the group Radek, a crowd of people crossing the street at an intersection in Moscow's lively downtown is interpreted as a political demonstration by placing the artists, like the revolutionary leaders of the past, in front of this passive crowd with their posters. Once the street has been crossed, however, everyone goes his own way. And Anatoly Ozmolovsky designed his political action in Moscow as a direct citation from the events of 1968 in Paris. The political imagination presents itself here as the storeroom of historical (pre)images that are available for appropriation.

This characterization does not, of course, apply to all the art made in the countries of the former Soviet Union. The reaction to the universalist, internationalist, Communist utopia does not always, or even primarily, consist in the attempt to think through this utopia more radically than was done under the conditions of real Socialism. Rather, people frequently reacted to this utopia with a demand for national isolationism, for the creation of a fixed national and cultural identity. This reaction could also be clearly noted already in the late Socialist phase, but it was intensified sharply after the new national states were created on the territory of the former Soviet Union, former Yugoslavia, and the former Eastern Bloc—and the search for national cultural identities became the main activity of those states. Admittedly, these national cultural identities were themselves cobbled together from appropriated remnants of the Communist empire, but as a rule this fact is not openly acknowledged. Rather, the Communist period is interpreted as a traumatic interruption of an organic historical growth of the national identity in question.

Communism is thus externalized, deinternationalized, and portrayed as the sum of the traumas to which a foreign power subjected one's own identity, which now requires therapy so that said identity can become intact again. For the non-Russian peoples of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the time of the dominance of the Communist parties is consequently presented as a time of Russian military occupation, under which the peoples in question merely suffered passively. For the theoreticians of Russian nationalism, in turn, Communism was initially the work of foreigners (Jews, Germans,

Latvians, etc.), but it had already been largely overcome during Stalinism and replaced by a glorious Russian empire. Thus the nationalists of all these countries are in complete agreement in their historical diagnosis, and they are prepared for further struggle, even though they repeatedly find themselves on different sides of this struggle. The only thing that falls out of this fortuitous consensus is post-Communist art, or better, postdissident art, which clings to peaceful universalism as an idyllic utopia beyond any struggle.