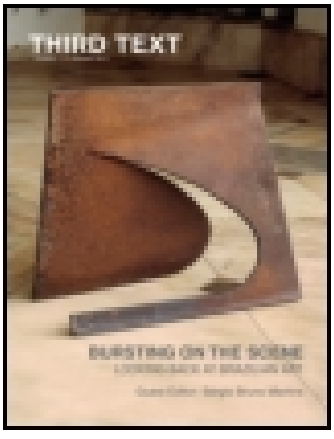

Third Text
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ctte20

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Published online: 04 Jun 2010.

To cite this article: Boris Groys (2003) Back from the future, Third Text, 17:4, 323-331, DOI: 10.1080/0952882032000166152

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0952882032000166152

Third Text, Vol. 17, Issue 4, 2003, 323–331

Back From the Future

Boris Groys

Anyone wishing to write about present-day Eastern European art really has no choice but once again to take sides on the inevitable question: can this art be said to possess a distinctive character, and if so, what precisely constitutes its particularity? In other words, whether and in what manner contemporary Eastern European art differs from its Western counterpart. Thus, I would like to start my essay by clearly stating that I do believe one may, and indeed should, speak of the particular nature of Eastern European art, whereby this distinction issues solely from the fact that it comes from Eastern Europe. Although this claim might at first seem somewhat tautological, it is actually not.

Contemporary art is to the utmost degree contextual. The times have passed when we were once able to identify and clearly distinguish national schools of art or international movements according to precisely definable and immediately recognisable formal characteristics. Today, artists from all over the world employ the same forms and procedures, but they use them in varying cultural and political contexts. Subsequently, our knowledge about these contexts is not an external feature of these works of art; instead, from the outset an artist can and must expect the viewer to regard the context in which he produces his art as an intrinsic dimension of his work. Works of art no longer simply speak for themselves: they also allude to the context in which they were made and are perceived immediately as signs, symptoms or information that instructs the viewer about the specific conditions prevailing in that part of the globe from where these works come. The same, incidentally, is also true for Western art: if the whole world were not so interested in what is going on right now in New York or Los Angeles, and if contemporary American art did not act as a source of information about the current state of affairs in American society, then this art would lose much of its attraction. Likewise, Eastern European art is seen inevitably as Eastern European, treated as a well of information on the state of affairs in those societies from which it has emerged, and not purely as the work of individual artists who conceivably might not even wish to be associated with these societies. Interestingly, such a sociological and ethnographic perspective on Eastern European art is by no means exclusive to art

Third Text ISSN 0952-8822 print/ISSN 1475-5297 online © 2003 Kala Press/Black Umbrella
http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals
DOI: 10.1080/0952882032000166152

commentary in the West. Even Eastern European art critics, along with the artists themselves, explore the art of their respective countries for symptoms that will help them diagnose the prevailing conditions in those countries.

So, under these circumstances one question in particular is raised: how is the respective art context – in this case, the Eastern European context – assessed on an international level, and how is the art produced within this context positioned by those observing it? Generally speaking, the present state of Eastern Europe is viewed as one of gradual approximation to the West following a long historical period of separation and alternative social development. Likewise, present-day art in Eastern Europe, which now quite manifestly employs the same language and the same procedures as Western art, is construed as one of the many tokens of such a 'rapprochement', albeit with extremely mixed feelings. From a political and, so to speak, humanitarian viewpoint, this process of assimilation is of course greeted as a welcome development – after all, how could any well-meaning person not wish improved economic and social conditions on all people everywhere? Yet from a different, aesthetic viewpoint, and one which is far more relevant to art itself, this convergence has prompted a surge of dismay – one would prefer neither to see it nor to hear about it. This is because today's globalised art thrives on differences: the art world is constantly in search of the *Other*, of what is distinctive or alternative. But with the demise of European communism we have also lost the most significant alternative to Western uniformity in recent history, one that was not merely formulated but also brought about. Its disappearance has made the world a poorer place in terms of differences and alternatives, and Eastern European art is currently held up as confirmation of this loss. Thus, as a social symptom, this art is seen as part of the overall syndrome affecting post-communist Eastern Europe: as a feature of the region's inundation by Western commercial interests and consumerist mass culture.

Furthermore, this symptom seems to have only secondary status. Art critics in Eastern Europe frequently deplore the dependence of Eastern European art upon the Western art market, Western art institutions and Western art criticism. Such dependency unquestionably exists, but its root cause lies primarily in the relatively weak social position enjoyed by current contemporary art in Eastern European countries – even if this varies from one country to another. The reason for its low standing is, incidentally, not related to the economic weakness of Eastern Europe – after all, art there could certainly survive financially if it were properly appreciated. Rather, the general public and art audiences in these countries are far more interested in commercialised art from the West than in their own, elitist contemporary art. As a result, this art remains ensconced in a minority enclave, making it doubly dependent upon international acknowledgement by art institutions that are dominated by the West. In turn, gaining such recognition essentially hinges on the degree to which Eastern European art manages to thematise the specificity of its own context and to allay the impression that blindly accepts, let alone happily connives in, the erasure of any distinctions between East and West. This raises the question of the artistic means that might be used to thematise the special nature of the post-communist art context, for it is surely quite evident to all concerned that the true

Alexander Deineka, *Building New Factories*, 1926

specificity of Eastern Europe can only reside in its communist past. However, any attempt to offer a more precise definition of this specificity is immediately hampered by considerable theoretical difficulties.

There is a limited range of options currently available to us in our repertoire of theoretical discourses for speaking about the past. First and foremost at our disposal is the language of trauma. Nowadays, the manifestation of the past in the present is most frequently explained and interpreted in terms of trauma. Accordingly, the specificity of *la condition post-communiste* would be represented as a result of the very particular traumatisation suffered by the peoples of Eastern Europe – which they should now be dealing with in this way or that. This is by and large the most common form of explanation, and by the same token also the least interesting. We now live in a world in which everyone seems to be traumatised by one thing or another; indeed, each one of us has some kind of past to show for, whereby, as already mentioned, the past as such has now become inconceivable as being anything other than traumatic. However different the causes for these traumata might be, what they all basically have in common is the figure of traumatisation itself; ultimately,

the various forms of traumatisation all begin to look remarkably similar. For this reason, the figure of the trauma is poorly suited as a means of characterising the special nature of the post-communist social condition: it is quite simply far too general. One should instead be asking precisely what kind of past the communist past represents and what distinguishes this past from other pasts.

As soon as this question is voiced, one is immediately confronted with the present-day discourse of cultural studies, a discipline that is preoccupied primarily with the issue of cultural differences, in so far as these are still detectable as traces of distinct patterns of traditional conditioning within the current globalised cultural arena. Conspicuously, however, in the context of cultural studies, where attention is directed primarily at the postcolonial world, the entire post-communist realm features as nothing more than a vast and unmitigated blind spot. This brings one to wonder whether the discourse of cultural identity as formulated in the context of postcolonial studies might not equally be applied to the cultural radius of the post-communist world.

Yet an application of this kind strikes me as impossible – and I will now attempt to describe the reason why. The prevailing discourse concerning cultural identity defines the human subject in transit from a premodern, contained, and isolated community towards a modern, open, globalised and networked society. This human being is supposed to adapt to the forces of modernity, which are presumed to be motors of homogenisation and uniformity. As a result, the human subject surrenders much of its premodern cultural tradition. In former times this loss was welcomed by the prevailing theory of progress, a response based on the credo that ancient traditions were vehicles for nothing more than myth and prejudice, and so, as barriers to progress, clearly deserved to be eliminated – even with force, if so required. By contrast, the current vogue of thinking in cultural studies regards these premodern traditions as generators of resistance against the totalitarian and levelling effect of modernity, which furthermore reacts with intolerance and oppression towards those cultures it deems 'underdeveloped'. What previously might have been diagnosed as underdevelopment would nowadays be hailed as cultural heterogeneity successfully at odds with and immune to the cultural imperialism of homogenising, progressive Western thinking. Rallying to the defence of heterogeneity and the dignity of cultural otherness can, of course, only be applauded – nonetheless, this approach is not applicable to the situation in post-communist Eastern Europe. Which is why all attempts to speak of post-communist cultural identity in the same register as postcolonial identity sound so implausible.

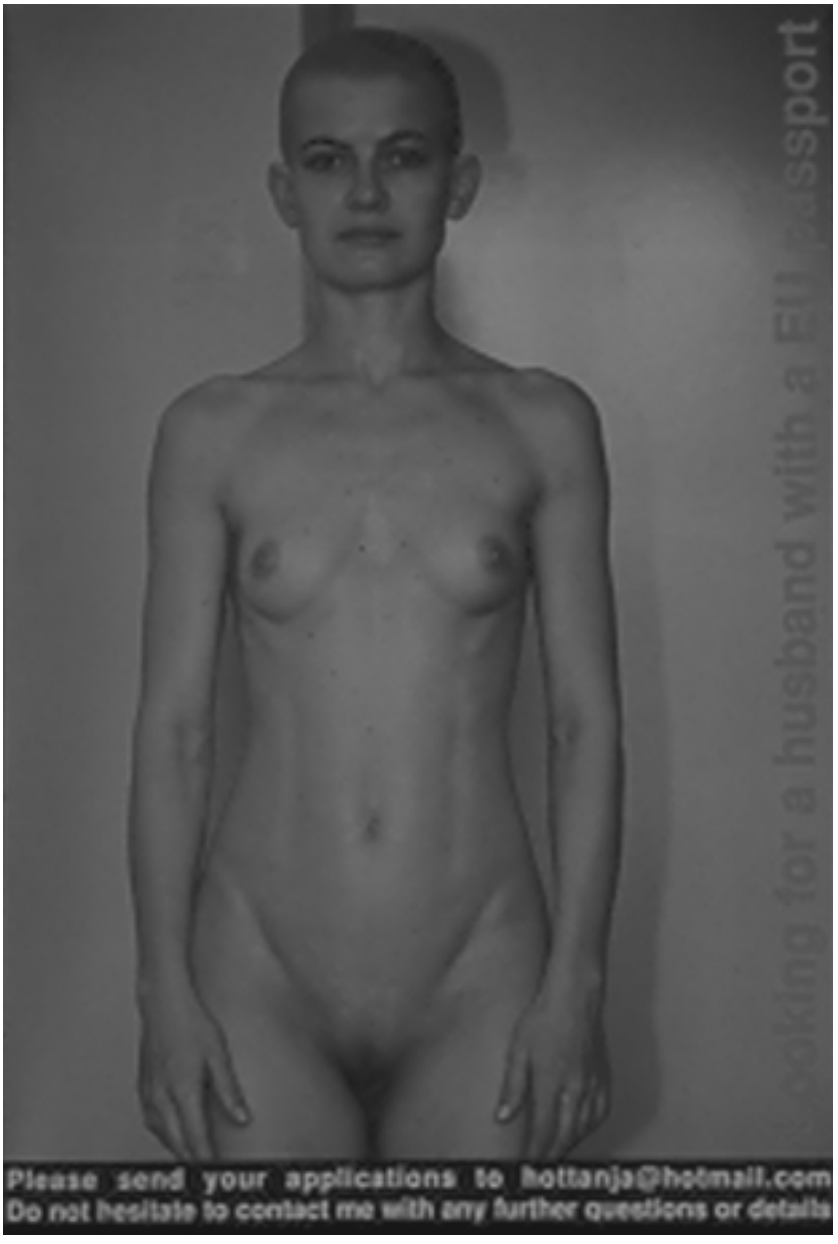
Communist-ruled societies might by all means have been hermetically closed societies but they were also utterly modern, asserting the credo of progress even more aggressively and combating the residue of premodern cultural identity with far greater vehemence than did liberal democracies in the West. Consequently, communist society offers an outstanding example of modernity that, rather than opening out, led towards enclosure and isolation; furthermore, it represents a prototype of modernity that is simply ignored by the predominant ideology of our time. Indeed, by insisting that the path of modernisation is also synonymous with a process of opening, and treating all forms of closed society simply as premodern, this ideology ignores that communism was

formulating its own agenda for globalisation, for which reason alone it should instead be ascribed to modernity. The cultural differences distinguishing the post-communist cultural sphere from the rest of the world therefore have thoroughly modern origins, as opposed to those differences with premodern roots commonly thematised by the school of cultural studies. As it happens, communism hardly represents a great exception in modern history; after all, modernity has persistently spawned its own apocalyptic sects, radical parties or avant-garde art movements that isolated or insulated themselves against their respective contemporary societies – although this was never done in the name of a particular past, but under the banner of some universal future. Once they have dispersed, what such modern, yet closed, communities leave behind them is not the past but the future. This means that although the post-communist subject takes the same route from enclosure to openness as its postcolonial counterpart, it moves along this path in quite the opposite direction – against the flow of time. While the postcolonial subject proceeds from the past into the present, the post-communist enters the present from the future. Certainly, moving against the flow of time has always been a tricky business; many an apocalyptic sect or avant-garde art movement has foundered on this task. The only thing that can be said to distinguish post-communist culture from these groups is its sheer size. Ultimately, communism is nothing more than the most extreme and radical manifestation of militant modernism, of the belief in progress and of the dream of an enlightened avant-garde acting in total unison, of utter commitment to the future. But it is precisely this dimension of communism, as indeed of all other projects that have pursued radical modernisation, that is currently being repressed from public consciousness, for at present modernity clamours to be seen as being an unreservedly liberal, tolerant and open-minded champion of human rights.

Where Eastern Europe is concerned, the denial of this aspect of communism goes hand in hand with an agenda of re-exoticising, re-orientalising and re-antiquitising former communist countries. Where communism once used to reign we must now have the Orient. The redefinition of Eastern Europe by the media is currently being performed as a purported 'rediscovery' of its varied archaic, premodern and ethnically shaped cultural identities, which are alleged to have remained the same as they always were. Yet what is quickly forgotten about communism is that under its rule the campaign to combat and eradicate regional and ethnic cultural identities in Eastern Europe was waged with far greater vehemence and thoroughness than in the West. And whatever national traditions still managed to survive were later tailored to the needs of prevailing ideology, reinterpreted and harnessed to the respective propaganda purposes of the time. Although national revivalism was invoked among dissident circles in various countries (even during the communist era) as part of the opposition strategy against communist internationalism, this amounted to little more than a gesture within a political field that bore no real allegiance to the continuity of national traditions; in fact, such traditions served merely as ideological simulacra within this altogether ideologised context. So when today's media, for example, show Russian *babushkas* (old women) weeping in churches to illustrate the image of an eternal Russia, they omit to mention that in the 1920s and 1930s the mothers and fathers of these

very *babushkas* had gone out plundering and torching the same churches – and for exactly the same reasons as today's *babushkas* file out to pray in the now newly reopened churches: political opportunism. After all, the proverbial *babushkas* choose to watch precisely those TV programmes that tell them how an up-to-date Russian *babushka* should behave in the context of contemporary politics.

Accordingly, the symbolic re-Orientalising of post-communist Eastern Europe, currently being cast in all international media as the rediscovery of



Tanja Ostojic, *Looking for a Husband with a EU passport*, 2001

its purported premodern and pre-communist identity, has above all one purpose: to inscribe the process of the simultaneous Westernisation of Eastern European countries into the currently dominant discursive framework. Had post-communist countries – then and now – always been Oriental, then this process of Westernisation could reasonably be described in the usual categories of modernisation, namely as the opening up of premodern, closed communities and as a transition from isolation to globalisation. But what is mostly ignored is that all these countries – and not just Russia – possess their own avant-garde traditions that are marked by uninterrupted continuity both in the official culture of the communist era as well as in dissident circles. The other fact that is overlooked is that these countries were all once fully integrated within a shared internationalist and globalist venture – the project of communism. Thus the real transition now being undergone by post-communist Eastern Europe, namely the passage from a militant form of modernity towards modernity in a moderate guise, is being symbolically displaced by an alleged transition from an Oriental, premodern condition into Western modernity. By being unwittingly inscribed into an Oriental context in this manner, the militant strategies of Eastern European modernity (which certainly also have their advocates in the West – communist ideology was, after all, a Western invention) are being portrayed as phenomena that are alien and foreign to Western modernity.

Yet significantly, in an endeavour to be radical, it is artistic modernism that has constantly shunned openness and instead preferred to operate with self-withdrawal, choosing to retreat from public communication and assume the programmatic posture of being misunderstood. So any attempt to explain artistic disparities with reference to premodern differences such as ethnicity disregards precisely the crucial promise of an innovative, future-oriented difference that is no longer rooted in the past, an opportunity that constitutes the very fascination of both modern art and modernity itself. For modern art proceeds within a now familiar paradox: the more modern, forward-looking and universal this art strives to be, the more exclusive its language becomes, the more esoteric is its effect on the viewer and the more it recoils from being directly understood by its audience. But this should be viewed neither as a failure of the original universalist project nor as the inevitable re-emergence of differences it had been attempting to suppress. On the contrary, it is evidence of the universalist project keenly following its own intrinsic logic. For every universalist project deliberately drives a sharp divide between those who adhere to it and those who prefer not to. The greater the universalist aspirations of a project, the deeper this division becomes and the more difficult it is to profess allegiance to it. Thus the art of the classical avant-garde made a conscious effort to avoid being immediately understood by its audience, precisely because it strove to be radically open and universal; it chose to address a new breed of universal humanity rather than the fractured and veritably pluralist public of its time. With this approach the avant-garde managed to split society, causing a rupture that defies explanation by reference to any previously existing cultural differences. It is the invention of this wholly new, artificial difference that represents the true work of art created by the avant-garde.

For language, including visual language, can be deployed not only as a means of communication, but also as an instrument for strategically

planned discommunication or even self-induced ex-communication, in other words, for deliberately abstaining from the communicating community. The purpose of this is to wield power over social differences, to evolve a strategy for generating new differences rather than overcoming or communicating the old ones. In the same way, a characteristic feature of modernist political movements has been precisely their repeated attempts to launch new avant-garde political parties or to formulate constantly new visions of the future that anyone could support if they so wished, thereby introducing new differences into society oriented towards the future rather than based on the past. Communism was just a further endeavour of this kind, not dissimilar to other strategies pursued by avant-garde art. Seen from this perspective, one might now identify one attribute of Eastern European art in particular that does indeed distinguish it from contemporary Western art, namely its collective or group-based character.

At present, the Western art market perceives the artist only as a lone figure who operates in this market under his own name as a free entrepreneur. The days of avant-garde groups and movements have long since passed. The formation of artists' groups in the West has become a difficult business – and those that do still establish themselves tend to cling nostalgically to the image of early avant-garde or socialist traditions. But anyone who is familiar with the various art scenes throughout Eastern Europe will know that artists' groups there do not represent an exception, but the general rule. On the whole these groups consistently manifest themselves as such: witness, for example, 'Collective Actions' and 'Medical Hermeneutics' in Russia, or 'Irwin' in Slovenia. Quite often artists will work in tandem, like Zavadov and Senchenko from the Ukraine. But there are also many instances where individual groups bear no official name and do not even exhibit or operate publicly under one, yet nonetheless still work as groups. The figure of this type of group formation, incidentally, is extensively reflected in the work of Ilya Kabakov; although he himself does operate individually, he ascribes his work to different imaginary authors and in this way acts in the name of a virtual group of artists. In Eastern Europe, artistic projects are thus still viewed as potentially collective operations that other artists are also welcome to join – as a means of distinguishing themselves from those who withhold their support. This marks a clear distinction vis-à-vis Western notions of an individual artistic project that, in spite of being communicated in a public forum, nonetheless lacks any desire to recruit further members or to establish a collective. That this amounts to a crucial factor distinguishing East from West is confirmed by the persistent inability on the part of Western art institutions to document such group-based artistic activities. Needless to say, these institutions are quite familiar with individual artists who represent collective cultural identities within a contemporary art context but, significantly, only that kind of identity which is premodern or socially repressed. On the other hand, what they are unfamiliar with is the fact that contemporary art might be presented in the form of a shared collective activity. This is why when artists from Eastern Europe and their works are exhibited in the West they are mostly shown individually and in isolation, extracted from their actual group habitat and transferred into a context frequently defined by highly dubious premises.

But it would be neither wise nor fair to demand of Western art institutions that they perform a task which instead is actually the duty of Eastern European artists, curators and art critics: to reflect on the specific context of contemporary art in Eastern Europe through its own art. Those who refuse to contextualise themselves will be implanted into a context by someone else and then run the risk of no longer recognising themselves. Nonetheless, Eastern European art has of course to some degree always performed this work of self-contextualisation and has been doing so for many years. But such a process will take a long time and is inevitably painstakingly slow.

Translated by Matthew Partridge