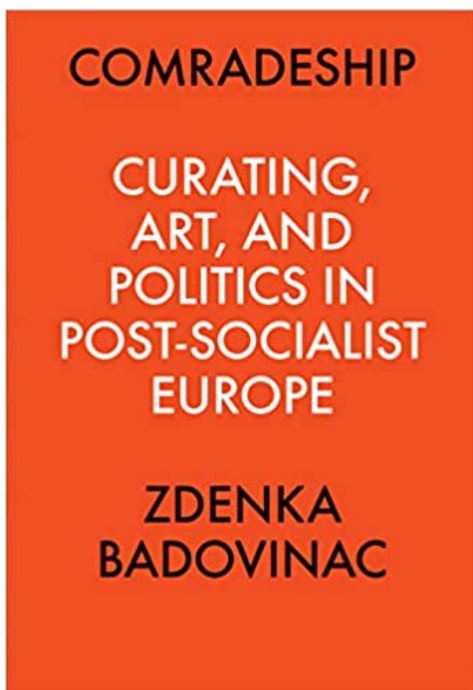


BOOK REVIEW



Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe

by Zdenka Badovinac

Edited by J. Myers-Szupinska

Foreword by Kate Fowle

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Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe compiles fifteen essays written by Slovenian curator, museum director, and scholar Zdenka Badovinac dating from 1998 to 2018. Badovinac's writing – most of it translated from Slovenian to English for the first time – introduces compelling curatorial methodologies, aesthetics and ethics that are worthwhile of critical consideration in Eastern Europe as they are in an international context. For someone that is not a specialist on Eastern European art like myself, this book offers an important revisionist perspective towards the relationship between art and art history. Badovinac's aim to prove that the progression of Modern Art has never been universal, but rather that artists working on the “margins” of the West, be it in Eastern Europe or in Latin America, are working with local histories as well as with the processes of contemporary globalization, is of the most significance today.

Badovinac's strategy of connecting the “local” with the “global” evades the common flattening of national differences while it challenges ideas of homogenization in the artworld, and expands definitions of museums, what curating and exhibitions are and could be. Most notably, Badovinac calls out the Western tendency to fixed identities of “otherness” and to embrace stereotypes, a tendency that is so often showcased in contemporary large scale exhibitions, that like many clichés, they express reductionism, as well as provoke it. Badovinac challenges those points of view that imply, in general, prejudices that, are both well established and conservative, which precisely annul the objectives of artistic creation, or of creation, in general. To avoid the repetition of the Master Narrative, from her own perspective, she proposes to implement new or unexpected curatorial tools and strategies which she identifies and expands in each essays.

There are revealing exchanges in the conversation between Badovinac and editor of the book J. Myers-Szupinska which help to situate the reader in the socio-political and cultural context of Eastern Europe, especially in the aftermath of socialism. Badovinac recalls that “nobody really discussed what would follow socialism. We talked about democracy, not about capitalism.”² The conversation fluctuates back and forth between a larger political context and Badovinac's curatorial approach; the dialectical tensions that bridge both

² Zdenka Badovinac, *Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-socialist Europe* (New York, New York): Independent Curators International, 2019, 22.

spaces, formulate arguments of a political nature that are hardly debated in the curatorial sphere.

When asked the complex question of “How does politics at that large scale relate to the museum, or to daily life?” she firmly responds that politics is about “consciously doing things to affect reality. Politics is not only about political parties or activism, but about how the museum responds to urgencies.”³ I wish every curator had this above line visibly written somewhere as a daily reminder. And I wonder, how will Badovinac’s museum or any contemporary museum *affect* reality in a post-COVID 19 world? Was André Malraux prophetic—inspired by Walter Benjamin—about the “imaginary museum”? Would they have anticipated this gradual transformation of the physical existence of works of art caused by digital proceedings that anticipated the closure of museums, visits to exhibitions, the revision of their collections or the countless number of conferences and online classes that have displaced the varied materiality that are held and accumulated at institutions?

The essays in Badovinac’s book are organized chronologically in five sections, with each one expressing a set of related ideas: (1) Exhibitions; History (2) Contemporaneity; Repetition (3) Collectivism; Self-Management (4) Modernism; Socialism; Cinema and (5) The Future; The Balkans. Overall, Badovinac’s writing reads like a succession manifestos, embodying strong arguments within transparent ideological frameworks. She herself reflect on this position, writing that when she became director of the Moderna galerija in 1993, after the collapse of Yugoslavia, and with its foundation, which became the central art institution of a new country: Slovenia, she found herself “in a situation in which [she] had to adopt a clear and unequivocal stance on many issues—not only because of the importance of the position [she] had assumed but also because of the nature of the moment [they] were living through.”⁴

Badovinac’s prolific writing cannot be understated. Considering the current demands imposed on the contemporary art curators—the over-production of exhibitions and constant travel—it is indeed admirable that she was able to dedicate time on the production of meaningful textual work. In a

³ Ibid., 29.

⁴ Ibid., 127.

conversation between her and the book's editor J. Myers-Szupinska, notes: "I would not be the same curator or museum director without writing, which demands I organize my thoughts and meditate on my work. The museum produces occasions to write, of course, but it also works the other way: writing generated the whole thinking of the museum."⁵ In the Editor's Note, Myers-Szupinska echoes Badovinac's words, writing that her texts "are a form of institutional thinking and institutional building enacted close to home. There is a direct relationship between her thinking as it is organized in her writing and her organization of Moderna galerija..."⁶.

The book's first section "Exhibitions; History" gathers catalogue essays Badovinac wrote for exhibitions held at Moderna galerija in Ljubljana. Here, she makes her most direct and compelling proposals. The first essay in this section, *Body and East: From the 1960s to the Present* (1998), was written for an exhibition of "body art," practices that emerged during socialism regimes in Eastern European cities such as Prague, Belgrade, Ljubljana, Warsaw, and Zagreb. In her essay Badovinac highlights performance artists in the East and emphasizes on the political limitations that artists had to work with such as police surveillance, significant censorship, and minimal personal freedoms. Badovinac gives the example of Romanian performance artist Ion Grigorescu who worked in relative isolation producing films and photographs. Performances in public and on the street were frequently banned by the police, which required many of the actions to take place in private apartments, with the artists performing at great personal risk.

Her second essay *Form-Specific Art*, written for the 2003 exhibition of the same title, challenges the selective Western history of formalist modernism "to expose the existence of multiple modernisms, to challenge the selectivity of the Western tradition, and to examine the specificity of local contexts."⁷ The third essay, *Interrupted Histories*, is the strongest and most relevant essay of the three. In it Badovinac writes:

⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁶ Ibid., 36.

⁷ Ibid., 68.

“Capitalism still dominates. Modernization is its tool, creating the false picture that spaces on the periphery are part of the same system as those that are more central, and that they are subject to similar conditions of production, presentation, and distribution, as well as compatible methods of historicization. “Others” are included into the Western system, but only as individuals who represent diversity. The established history does not essentially change—it merely expands.”⁸

Even though the exhibition focused primarily on Eastern Europe, and to some extent, the Middle East, Badovinac observes that being excluded from the art historical canon is a concern shared by the non-Western world as a whole. These essays beg for brief introductions that would provide more detail on the exhibitions they discuss. Even though the essays are able to stand alone, annotations providing more information would have added a more rich dimension to the matters discussed.

In the second section, titled “Contemporaneity; Repetition,” Badovinac recognizes that Eastern Europe shares with Latin America a past of trauma, violence, wars, dictatorship, and censorship, as well as a present desire to challenge Master Narratives of Western art. Both regions, operating on the margins of the Euro-American centric art history, must dedicate, in her view, their contemporary museums to the local contexts at the same time as they participate in the global exchange of ideas. She continues suggesting, for instance, that the *contemporary* art museum should be a place where we move beyond art history, and establish a new platform “from which we could see Art History from the outside.”⁹

In return, Badovinac calls for a *meta-position* that the contemporary museum and curator activities must hold. That is, a need to constantly self-reflect on its own position and re-define itself. Badovinac argues that colonialism is inseparable from “modernity,” while “contemporaneity” has the potential or obligation to *decolonize* itself through a process of self-determination—creating new narratives. In 2016, eight years after Badovinac’s essays on this topic, the Museum of Modern Art in New York opened the exhibition *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960-1980*, which invoked some of the ideas from Badovinac’s writings and

⁸ Ibid., 96.

⁹ Ibid., 119.

served as a much-needed international exhibition grappling with the “true history” of two regions with much in common.

During the Cold War, Badovinac noticed that influential international critics and curators decided to ignore the art of countries under communist dictatorships with the exception of Pierre Restany and a few others.¹⁰ How can this omission be explained? Was it just due to lack of information? Could there have been other reasons that would justify this silence? Were the artistic movements confused with exhibitions of official art or, on the contrary, as forms of opposition to those regimes? Only after the fall of the socialist regimes at the end of the twentieth century did new regions begin to be part of global conversations. Exhibitions dedicated to the art of the Balkan states, for example, were held mostly in Central Europe (the majority held in Austria and Germany). Around this time, there were also several international surveys of Latin American art: in 1989 the exhibition *Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980*, curated by Dawn Ades for the Hayward Gallery in London, and *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1993, curated by Waldo Rasmussen. Badovinac, however, pops the illusion bubble regarding these “inclusive” exhibitions, pointing on the western desire to integrate *economically* new markets into the European Economic Area, founded in 1994.

The question “who is the narrator?” in other words, who is writing history or who is historicizing, is central in Badovinac’s criticism of the exhibitions she discusses—such as the ambitious 1994 exhibition *Europe Europe* in Bonn, Germany—all produced in the West, and often acting to promote multiculturalism and integration in the neoliberal sense promoted by the European Union.

In the third section of the book titled “Collectivism; Self-Management,” Badovinac writes about how Eastern European artists in the 1960s-80s were forced to look for new and alternative forms of *collectivism* as a result of cultural isolation, which also led to scarce opportunities for developing individual art careers. Badovinac gives examples of artist collectives such as OHO and Neue Slowenische Kunst (NKS) who worked from within a different tradition of understanding collectivity and utopia, especially collectives that

¹⁰ Restany also visited Latin America multiple times, participating in juries, writing about young artists, and supporting conceptual and pop art from the region.

looked to the avant-gardes of the twentieth century as role models. She adds that artists in the 1980s “no longer related only to the question of collaborative practice and solidarity among artists, but to their impact on local and international systems of art and culture. Local histories became their tools of operation, and they became newly interested in the Eastern European avant-gardes, especially those with ties to the revolutionary movements of the early twentieth century.”¹¹ Even though Badovinac’s ideas of “comradeship” are suggested throughout the book, she significantly expands this notion in the third section.

The fourth section includes a standalone essay titled “Tobias Putrih: Šiška, International,” written to accompany the work of Slovenian artist Tobias Putrih in the 2010 exhibition *Promises of the Past* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Badovinac’s points out that Putrih’s problematization of the movie theater—equipping movie theaters without movies—is also a way to think about the history of art in the twentieth century and its concern with the relationship between a work of art and its frame. Putrih’s work exists as a structure for presenting cultural production by Eastern European artists in the “absence of official forms of historization, to provide their work with a suitable context.”¹²

The book’s last section “The Future; The Balkans,” includes three essays and a glossary from recent years (2014-2018). The essay “Happy End of the Cold War” reviews artists such as Komar and Melamid and the Yugoslav group IRWIN who dismissed the binary and oppositional ideas of capitalism and communism, West and East. Instead these artists brought ideas together that had previously been considered irreconcilable. “Future from the Balkans” is this section’s second essay where Badovinac writes about artists’ experimentation on collectivity (such as works using social media) during the refugee crisis in Europe. She writes: “Whatever the outcomes of these crises, change on a global scale seems inevitable, and therefore requires preparation—including through investigating the potential forms of collectivity already extant in our present-day reality.”¹³ The third text “Sites of Sustainability” was produced to accompany the exhibition titled *Hello World: Revisiting the Collection* at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin in which Badovinac was a guest

¹¹ Ibid., 188.

¹² Ibid. 237.

¹³ Ibid., 278.

curator. For the part of the exhibition that Badovinac curated, she selected works from the collection of Moderna galerija together with works from the collection of the host institution. The essay focuses on alternative types of artistic production between the 1950s and 1980s in what was then Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, Hungary, Poland and the GDR. The discussed artists, employed strategies of sustainability in the *survival* sense: “Art was understood to be a condition of its own production, a site of its own sustenance, and a means of its own survival.”

The final essay, “My Post-Catastrophic Glossary,” takes the form of a diary (with illustrations) written in the aftermaths of an imagined disaster that has left all museums and educational institutions of the world in ruins. In the “Destruction” entry of the diary, Badovinac writes: “These days my thoughts often drift back to Malevich... to his demand that all museums be burned to the ground. The only way the artworks they housed could be made relevant again, he said, was if they were incinerated—reduced to ashes, collected in jars, and placed in a pharmacy. Then, he allowed, contemporary artists could use them as a kind of medicine.” I look forward to a future essay (perhaps titled “Destruction”) where Badovinac might write about the contemporary museum in times of unforeseen crisis such as the one we are now living in. How can we face these topics when the notions of relationships, of connections have radically changed—when distance and proximity are understood differently from how they were understood until now, when galleries and museums are emptied. Considering the current situation, I wonder what would Badovinac would say about “group-work” and her other proposals in these times of social isolation and distancing? How would Badovinac’s self-reflexive contemporary museum look like?