INCIDENT TRANSGRESSIONS

A REVIEW OF TRANSMISSIONS: ART IN EASTERN EUROPE AND LATIN AMERICA, 1960–1980, MOMA

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Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980, September 5, 2015–January 3, 2016, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In English, the noun *transmission* \tran(t)s-'mi-shən, tranz-\ is defined as "an act, process, or instance of transmitting." Reiterated as a verb, it means "to send (information, sound, etc.) in the form of electrical signals to a radio, television, computer, etc.," but also to "to give or pass (information, values, etc.) from one person to another" and "to cause (a virus, disease, etc.) to be given to others."[1] Spanish retains the same uses of the term: *transmisión* may refer to systems of communication, as well as to the pathology of disease. Another meaning of the term applies to mechanics, the transmission of power from an engine or a source to a system of wheels, automotive or otherwise. The term has Latin roots, in which the prefix *trans* ("across, beyond, through") is paired with the verb *mittere* ("to send"). A number of the artworks from the present exhibition can be read in at least two of these ways, perhaps simultaneously: as instances of transmission and as acts of transferal,

1 Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, accessed November 28, 2015, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transmission.

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transiting information from one moveable archive to another, along narrative lines with multiple points of entry—and exit.

Transmissions, the exhibition, included around 300 works of art and related documentation from Eastern Europe and Latin America. It set out to bridge the great physical distance that separates these broadly defined geopolitical regions, by suggesting that the two shared more cultural and aesthetic ground during the decades under consideration than may have been readily apparent. By aiming to explore primarily transnational connections, the show proposed a reframing of previous curatorial models prescriptively structured along either East-West or North-South axes. The exhibition nonetheless pursued this working hypothesis within the parameters of a historiography foregrounded by Cold War categories. Accordingly, the design of the display, organized in chronologically sequenced thematic sections, staged a contradiction of sorts by reinforcing established aesthetic taxonomies while seeking to unsettle them. In departing from the binary interpretative and rhetorical frameworks inherited from the Cold War, the show posited a common set of art practices as the connective tissue between cultural institutions, individuals, and groups with little or no direct relation to one other.[2] By documenting forms of dissent from official discourses and authoritarian regimes alike, it sought to historicize these artistic practices as reacting to both local (or national) and global (or extra-national) conditions. Whether artists shared or contested this ideological ground remains a matter of debate, especially since the exhibition failed to explore concrete points of contact among the works displayed. In the absence of a more careful analysis of the historic conditions that produced the objects included in Transmissions, we run the risk of leveling their specificity and complexity by ascribing them to the universality of artistic dissent. Given our desire to see utopian networks of social, political, and aesthetic engagement realized on a global scale, and to construct an emancipatory, oppositional,

2 In practice, many of these distinctions remain unchallenged, if not reinforced, by the displays, beginning with the categories of Latin American and Eastern European art. Between 1960 and 1980 both regions were reconstituted in geopolitical terms, yet along divergent chronologies, even if they coincided at times. In contrast to Latin America, it is much harder to speak of the existence of a shared Eastern European identity in the period in question. Although cultural and aesthetic connections between Eastern Bloc countries were certainly extant, they were nonetheless of a different nature. Arguably, the later art historical–art market category is a post-1989 construct, emerging in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

progressive art history, we should interrogate the differences we may inadvertently collapse.[3]

To quote the press release, Transmissions explored "the radical experimentation, expansion, and dissemination of ideas that marked the cultural production of these decades (which flanked the widespread student protests of 1968) and challenged established art historical narratives in the West."[4] This alleged *détournement* of the Western canon—hinging upon the perceived universality of 1968 as a year-zero for political awakening and for the manifestation of dissent in the postwar era—might appear contradictory at times. Many of the practices expounded in the show were conceived as a continuation of the European-based international avant-garde that had been uprooted and permanently unsettled by half a century of intermittent war. Artists, especially in Eastern Europe, deliberately sought to align themselves with developments West of the Berlin Wall, in defiance of official cultural politics, including Socialist Realist discourses, thoroughly installed in their home countries. Reactionary modernism, in its most stiflingly formal and politically disengaged forms, endured across disciplines from painting to architecture and well into the later decades of the century. The history of such modernisms, however, lay outside the parameters of the exhibition, which focused instead on progressive, anti-establishment, nontraditional practices. A great number of the artworks on view were created by artists and collectives that were not only familiar with the international aesthetic vocabulary of the European and American postwar avant-garde, but also contributed to its formation directly, even when local conditions were prohibitive or impeded artists' movement. Decidedly, only a small percentage of the

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3 To quote Stephen G. Rabe, by contrast to Eastern Europe, where a "congratulatory view of U.S. Cold War policies" prevails to this day, "memories of the Cold War in Latin America are bitter, without much sense of appreciation for the U.S. triumph over the Soviet Union." See Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), xxiv. Although only a small number of studies have approached the analysis of art production during the Cold War from a comparative perspective, important contributions have been made by historians and political scientists. See, for instance, Caterina Preda, "Civil Society Activism and Authoritarian Rule in Romania and Chile, Evidence for the Role Played by Art(ists)," in *Civil Society Activism under Authoritarian Rule, A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Francesco Cavatorta (London: Routledge, 2012): 57–72.

4 Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Department of Communications, "Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980," press release, July 13, 2015, accessed November 28, 2015, http://press.moma.org/wp-content/files_mf/transmissionspress release_final49.pdf.

works on view were made in extreme isolation, and even then relatively so. Artists from both regions conceived of their practices as dialoguing with urban centers where the international postwar avant-garde converged. Some of these centers were located in Western Europe and the United States, yet not all.[5]

Much less common was the direct exchange between these two regions, so that it was via Paris, New York, or various other "bohemian" destinations that connections were triangulated. Certainly neither West nor East, North nor South, was hermetically sealed, and even the most restrictive regimes from the Eastern Bloc found it difficult to contain or censor the flow of information. Whether through international encounters such as festivals and biennials, traveling exhibitions, publications including samizdat and magazines that were distributed both openly and underground, or by word of mouth, cultural information continued to be exchanged. Mail Art constitutes perhaps the single most pervasive example, as it relentlessly evaded diverse forms of control. As Cristina Freire and Klara Kemp-Welch have noted, "The dynamic marginal art scenes that developed under Latin American military dictatorships and in late socialist Eastern Europe were often characterized by their commitment to free cultural exchange and networking. . . . From the peripheries of the Cold War, a marginal cultural intelligentsia sought creative ways to inhabit countercartographies and an alternative sense of belonging."[6]

In placing postwar art from Latin America and Eastern Europe alongside each other, and by privileging moments of connection between the two over their relation to canonical centers, the transnational, short-circuited curatorial tactic adopted in Transmissions enabled a symbolic revisiting of Cold War ruptures, gesturing, perhaps unintentionally, toward the recovery of cultural memory. A range of recent publications have sought to engage the ramifications of this global paradigm within the reconfigured dynamics of an increasingly

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5 In an essay commissioned for Transmissions, Klara Klemp-Welch argues that for most artists working at the time in both regions, national as well as regional considerations were secondary to their artistic preoccupations, as they sought to create work that transgressed geopolitical limitations. See Klara Kemp-Welch, "Species of Spaces in Eastern European and Latin American Experimental Art," Post (MoMA Web resource), posted February 29, 2016, http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/761-species-of-spaces-in-eastern-european-and-latin-american-experimental-art.

6 Klara Kemp-Welch and Cristina Freire, "Artists' Networks in Latin America and Eastern Europe," *ARTMargins* 1, no. 2–3 (2012): 3–13.

politicized field of action—a notable example is the collection of essays *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn*, edited by Jill H. Casid and Aruna D'Souza, published in 2014.[7] In an article that preceded the appearance of the volume, D'Souza critiqued the sedimentation of global approaches that are insufficiently grounded in often divergent, complex, and heterogeneous histories, noting the essentializing force of this discourse—particularly in relation to economic globalization. Terms such as "global art history" and "world art history," she writes, "do not simply denote a general search for a transformation of art historical boundaries but, in fact, a more specific project that aims to synthesize aesthetic cultures from all geographical and temporal sites."[8] In D'Souza's view, any reorientation of the art historical field must begin with a reassessment of Western art historical methods by "studying Western art in light of methods emerging from the study of the non-Western, or from those areas that have been marginalized by the discipline up to now."[9]

An adequate critique of globalism as it enters the mainstream curatorial field should ground itself in the analysis of specific objects and practices. Having set up the historiographic and curatorial parameters of Transmissions, I now turn to the specific objects it displayed, mapping out their configurations—those made visible and those that remained invisible—through my own movements and observations. Following D'Souza's provocation, I argue that the exhibition brought non-Western and previously marginal practices in close proximity to each other, thus destabilizing their relation to their associated centers, a tactic undergirded by the very architecture of the display.

TRANSMISSIONS: A WALKTHROUGH

From the escalator I walk into the lobby of the museum's top floor, and notice a silent recording zoomed in on a speaker's enunciating lips. I'm watching Eduardo Costa's *Names of Friends: Poem for the Deaf-Mute* (1969), a blurry strip of super-8-mm film shot in one go. My lip-reading attempts are futile, and with no additional information the

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7 Jill H. Casid and Aruna D'Souza, eds., *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn* (Williamstown: Clark Art Institute, 2014).

8 Aruna D'Souza, "In the Wake of 'In the Wake of the Global Turn'," *ARTMargins* 1, no. 2–3 (August–October 2012): 177.

9 Ibid., 185.

friends' identities remain unknown. Slipping into the absurd, the repeated maxillary movements become analogous to breathing, and the piece takes on darker undertones, considering the heated political climate in Argentina, where within the space of four years two democratic governments were overthrown through military coups.[10] Antonio Dias's flag, raised that same year, while the artist was living in exile from a Brazil under dictatorial military rule, leans forward on an adjacent wall—the piece is titled *The Invented Country (God-Will-Give-Days)*. Assuming this point of entry, I then cross the diagonal threshold marked by David Lamelas's to-be-performed *Time* (1970), which I catch at a moment of pause.

The exhibition opens in the self-aware white cube of the museum with a composite display of painting and sculpture, artworks dating to and around the year 1960, a period of intense formal experimentation. We see the refinement of ideas that shaped both mediums: an emphasis on geometric abstraction inflected by a growing interest in conceptual techniques. The work of Lucio Fontana stands out, his *Spatial Concepts* rupturing the very surface of representation and the field of signification. An Italian émigré born in Argentina, he was an unforgiving iconoclast who, together with Piero Manzoni, whose work is on view on the adjacent wall, paved the way for the emergence of Arte Povera and associated experimental art/life forms. Viewers may recognize the work of Brazilian artist Lygia Clark, recently shown as part of the artist's retrospective in the same galleries.[11] Her *bichos* foreground notable examples of the North American modernism most commonly associated with the Museum, such as Ellsworth Kelly's *Running White* (1959), newly activated through its coupling with Victor Vasarely's exalted forms, *Ondho* (1956–60). Packed full with other shrewdly elegant and iconic modernist artworks, the display in this first room feels somewhat didactic with its pairings of "cosmopolitan Modernisms" (to use Kobena Mercer's term) scrutinized in bright light. Artists such as Gego, Mira Schendel, Soto, Julio Le Parc, and Vasarely embody such cosmopolitan, or transnational, idealism, through their lifelong

10 Costa, who belonged to that important generation of experimental artists that gathered around Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires during the sixties, had in fact relocated to New York in 1967. The enunciated names were those of his new group of friends and collaborators in the city.

11 Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948–1988 was on view at MoMA between May 10 and August 24, 2014.

pursuit of abstract experimentation as well as their biographies. While the first two artists left Europe to escape antisemitic fascism, Soto and Le Parc moved to Paris after the war, joining Vasarely in expanding Kinetic and Op Art projects with the support of gallerists such as Denise René.

We are told by the wall text that the exhibition Art Abstrait Constructif International that René organized in 1961–62 provided inspiration for the present display, since it featured both Eastern European and Latin American artists whose work demonstrated similar artistic approaches. Indeed, we see here the emergence of an enduring formalist model, whereby these artists' dedicated pursuit of formal experimentation, although sensitive to their individual contexts, led them to participate first and foremost in a conversation that superseded national and political borders. Nonetheless, the specifics of the two counterposed or juxtaposed regions remain unclear, and while depth of context appears central to the exhibition's stated intent, this "preface" sets the ensuing presentation onto a divergent *parcours*.

Brazilian Neoconcrete artist Willys de Castro's *Active Object* (1961) provides a compelling transition to the next gallery, its combine-logic a running exercise in perspective, with painted surfaces turned sculptural and vice versa. Attention now shifts from *objets d'art* to anti-institutional and "anti-art" practices developed by Eastern European artist collectives during the sixties: Gorgona (1959–66) and OHO (1966–71) in Yugoslavia, and Aktual (1964–) in Czechoslovakia, with the Venezuelan group El Techo de la Ballena (1961–68) added in.[12] Inspired by the countercultural sentiment particular to the decade, while also wary of the state's (and its dependent cultural institutions') encroachment onto their eminent domain, artists came together in groups, more loosely bound and perhaps less self-involved than their avant-garde or neo-avant-garde precursors. Flirting with burgeoning conceptualist approaches, they staged their works outside of galleries, pushing them out onto the street—to the extent permitted by the powers that be—or bringing them back into the more intimate space of their studios and apartments. Gorgona, for instance, met haphazardly; artists "socialized and went for walks in the center or outside

12 OHO first exhibited at MoMA as part of Kynaston McShine's influential Information exhibition (1970), which was an important precedent for this show. Some of the materials from the display case, in fact, come from that exhibition's archival files.

of town without any defined plans or conclusions. They talked spontaneously about seemingly insignificant topics from their day-to-day lives and exchanged opinions about books they had read, but they never discussed their artistic preoccupations and professional activities, since these remained the sovereign right of each individual."[13] The Prague-based group Aktuální Umění ("Contemporary Art" in English, yet commonly referred to as Aktual Art) erased the Art (*Umění*) from its name in 1965. Following years of intense experimentation, the Slovenian group OHO developed its own brand of "transcendental conceptualism," eventually dissolving into a commune established in the village of Šempas in 1971. These groups stubbornly sought to collapse the categories of art and life and to deliver a final blow to the institution of art, which they perceived as corrupted and failed.

Transmissions explores the legacy of these and other groups through an overflowing array of objects and ephemera, magazines, photographs, texts, and record files. All eleven issues of Gorgona's "anti-magazine" are on view, as well as several issues of *Aktuální Umění* magazine, produced between 1964 and 1968. Revelatory is Aktual member Sonia Švecová's richly layered collage work, which also provides the single most colorful respite in the room, and is as such in dialogue with founding Gorgona member Mangelos's (Dimitrije Bašičević's) Constructivist palette. A significant portion of the display is taken up by a selection of documents from Milan Knížák's "Performance Files" (1962–85). Although produced in retrospect, these files offer a unique perspective on a range of actions and activities initiated by the artist and his collaborators during the sixties and seventies.[14] Knížák was a central figure amongst independent art circles in Prague: he was a founding member of Aktual and closely associated with the international Fluxus movement, particularly with George Maciunas, who named him director of Fluxus East, and with Ken Friedman, director of Fluxus West. In art, as in life, Knížák tested boundaries, and he was one of the few artists from Eastern Europe

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13 Ješa Denegri, "Gorgona Group—Now and Then," Post (MoMA Web resource), posted July 9, 2013, http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/176-gorgona-group-now-and-then.

14 Assembled during the early eighties, the 101 "files" came to MoMA as part of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, donated in 2008. See Kim Conaty, "Milan Knížák's Performance Files," Post (MoMA Web resource), posted January 20, 2015, http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/557-milan-knizak-s-performance-files.

who was able to maintain consistent contacts outside of Europe, sometimes in person, but more often through the mail.[15]

The disobedience and playfulness that characterize such unruly bodies of work exposed artists to varying degrees of personal risk. Knížák, to take just one example, following his return to Czechoslovakia in 1970 after traveling for two years in the United States, was placed under constant surveillance, and repeatedly arrested and jailed. As Dubravka Djurić has written, "Eastern European conceptual art is politicized by the very fact of its critical and decentralized positioning in the political landscape controlled by the bureaucratic structure of single-party political systems."[16] Indeed, while the Yugoslav context was somewhat more permissive during this period, due to Tito's Non-Aligned ambitions and the state's opening to the West, in Czechoslovakia the respite facilitated by Alexander Dubček's reforms during the Prague Spring of 1968 was violently cut short by the intervention of Soviet and Warsaw Pact military.

The objects seen in these galleries bear witness to the urgency of many of these artists' projects. Their emphasis on mobility and circulation, as they sought to distribute their ideas through pamphlets, magazines, and letters, privileged more easily "transferable" conceptual strategies and ephemeral actions—all in all, these practices betray a hyperaware relation to information, with pathways of transmission constantly under threat. These *modi operandi* were certainly not exclusive to the countries considered by the show.

The influence, on Transmissions, of recent curatorial strategies that have sought to reposition the enduring legacy of European Modernism and of Conceptualism is as glaring as it is unacknowl-

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15 In a compelling essay, Tomáš Pospiszyl explores the ramifications of the Fluxus project out East, with particular consideration given to collaborations between Knížák and Friedman, such as the *Keeping Together Manifestations*, which took place simultaneously in California and in Prague during the late sixties. See Tomáš Pospiszyl, "Milan Knížák and Ken Friedman: Keeping Together Manifestations in a Divided World," Post (MoMA Web resource), posted September 1, 2015, http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/683-milan-knizak-and-ken-friedman-keeping-together-manifestations-in-a-divided-world. Further connections are pursued as part of Post's edited collection of essays "Fluxus Threads in Eastern Europe," accessed November 28, 2015, http://post.at.moma.org/themes/21-fluxus-threads-in-eastern-europe. An additional comprehensive source is Petra Stegmann, ed., *Fluxus East: Fluxus-Netzwerke in Mittelosteuropa* (*Fluxus Networks in Central Eastern Europe*) (Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 2007).

16 Dubravka Djurić, *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 213.

edged. I am thinking specifically about the influence of the *constellar* model, introduced by Héctor Olea and Mari Carmen Ramírez with their exhibition Heterotopías: Medio Siglo Sin-Lugar, 1918–1968 (organized first at the Museo Reina Sofía in 2000, and restaged in 2004 as Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America, at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston), and the network-based model explored in the exhibition Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s, curated by Jane Farver, Rachel Weiss, and Luis Camnitzer at the Queens Museum of Art in 1999.[17] At MoMA, a recent iteration of this type of approach was the exhibition Joaquín Torres-García: The Arcadian Modern (2015–16), which explored Torres-García's contribution to the development of both local and transnational artistic practices within the context of the early-20th-century international avant-gardes. In an essay published in Post, Luis Pérez-Oramas, curator of the aforementioned exhibition, writes:

> I still believe that we can understand Latin American modernity as a modern archipelago, i.e., an archipelago of modernities, in which the ceaseless dynamism of the Nachleben—Aby Warburg's idea of formal and ideological afterlife and survival—of modernity took place and still does take place. It takes place when one refers to a location rather than a moment. In this sense, the various iterations of this afterlife of modernity that took place in the vast body

17 Both models are rooted in Benjaminian and Adornian dialectics, and approach historic processes as a sequence of interrelated rather than linear events; the formal and conceptual connections between artworks are explored through a similar logic. In a recent article, Daniel Quiles analyzes the problematics of "network"-based curatorial models in depth. He argues

> The network allows for a paradoxical rejection and reinforcement of Latin America's peripheral status. Networks imbricate "here" and "there," attending to connections and flows of people, exhibitions, institutions and ideas. Therefore, nothing happens in a vacuum, yet developments may occur in localized "nodes" that delay or distort the transmission of new developments to larger nodes within the network (formerly "centers"). In this way, "Latin America" can at once be seen as a (provisionally) bounded periphery in which important new ideas are formed and circulated, and a set of nodes in a global art ecology—an essential part of a system.

See Daniel R. Quiles, "Exhibition as Network, Network as Curator: Canonizing Art from 'Latin America'," *Artl@s Bulletin* 3, no. 1 (2014): 63. Also relevant is a series of articles by several of the Global Conceptualism curators, recently commissioned by the Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives initiative (C-MAP) under the theme "Global Conceptualism Reconsidered": Post (MoMA Web resource), posted April 29, 2015, http://post.at.moma.org/themes/19-global-conceptualism-reconsidered.

of the Americas, beyond fictions of difference and fables of transference, should be understood as a topological rather than a chronological set of events.[18]

Transmissions expands upon these comparative approaches, proposing the primacy of networks, but without investigating them in depth.

Latin American conceptualists are featured prominently in the following galleries, starting with a case study of concerted, politically engaged practices that emerged around the Centro de Artes Visuales at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella in Buenos Aires between 1959 and 1970.[19] Artworks by Oscar Bony, David Lamelas, and Marta Minujín, all made in and around 1968, exemplify the outspoken, if not outright militant, ethos of the decade, influenced as it was by critic and theorist Oscar Masotta's interests in structuralism, Pop Art, and contemporary media theory, notably that of Marshall McLuhan.[20] At the center of the room is a refabricated version of Lamelas's action/performance *The Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels: The Visual Image, Text and Audio*, which was first shown at the Finnish Pavilion during the 1968 Venice Biennale. During the Cold War, the Biennale provided an unusual outlet for artists living in authoritarian contexts, constituting a platform for exchange. The revolutions and anti-imperialist movements that accompanied the struggle for freedom and emancipation in the postcolonial context in the Global South were

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18 Luis Pérez-Oramas, "Collecting Latin American Art: Projecting Names onto Nameless Practices," Post (MoMA Web resource), posted December 18, 2015, http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/737-collecting-latin-american-art-projecting-names-onto-nameless-practices.

19 The environment created by the institute itself, which fostered collaboration and experimentation, certainly had notable parallels in Eastern Europe, none of which are investigated in the exhibition. A more fortuitous connection was enabled by the friendship between Jorge Glusberg, director of the interdisciplinary CAYC (Centro de Arte y Comunicación) in Buenos Aires since its foundation in 1968, and Hungarian art critic László Beke. Hungarian art thus made it across the ocean, being shown at CAYC on two separate occasions: at the Festival de Vanguardia Hungara 73, and in the exhibition Hungria 74. See Miklós Peternák and Annamária Szőke, "Tomorrow Is Evidence!," in *Subversive Practices, Art under Conditions of Political Repression: 60s–80s/South America/Europe*, ed. Hans D. Christ and Iris Dressler (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009), exhibition catalog, 136.

20 For an extended discussion of the Di Tella media art movement and associated experiments, see Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) and Daniel R. Quiles, "Mediate Media: Buenos Aires Conceptualism" Post (MoMA Web Resource), posted February 16, 2016, http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/755-mediate-media-buenos-aires-conceptualism.

paralleled by mass protests and social and civil rights movements in the West. Following the Cuban Missile Crisis, the war in Vietnam motivated international solidarity in the movement for peace and non-proliferation, particularly in a Latin America wary of US interventions. Artists retorted by mobilizing and hijacking the ideological functions of mass media technologies for their own ends. Lamelas's office delivered news about the escalating war—1968 was the year of the infamous Tet Offensive—supplied live by telex and recounted by an office attendant in Italian, Spanish, and French. At MoMA, the news is also translated to English: "Ascoltare qui, Escuchar, Écoutez, Listen," the text adjacent to the audio sets reads, as viewers approach the glass vitrine that separates the recreated office from the gallery space. Seated inside, the translator carefully hung her sweater on the back of her chair, and placed her bag at the side. As a museum visitor moves up close, camera in hand, she slowly raises the scripted sheet to cover her face. Her gesture highlights the sensitive nature of the information, drawing attention to the other objects in the reenactment room: a glass of water, photographs, sheets of paper, a typewriter, a tape recorder, a seemingly disconnected wire transmission, and finally two telephone receivers. Lamelas's action is revealed as both lived and staged, factual information leading to misinformation and the other way around, like a Möbius strip. Within this unidirectional communication, the listener becomes implicated as the silent witness/spectator; at the same time, she is the only party that has the choice to hang up and move on.

A series of discussions between art makers from Eastern Europe and Latin America unfolds in parallel in the subsequent galleries. Again, the show has failed to provide the depth of context that would be necessary for such connections to be understood fully, even by a specialized public. Polish-born Argentinean-French artist Lea Lublin's installations provide a transition to Eastern European artists from a slightly older generation, who nonetheless worked at the intersection of concept-driven practices, performance, and sculptural form. Installations by Polish artists Edward Krasiński and Henryk Stażewski are given ample space to expand along an imagined horizon line, brusquely interjected by the vertical lines of Daniel Buren's precisely painted *Black and White Striped Fabric: External White Bands Covered Over with White Paint, Recto-Verso* (1970) and by one of Polish-born, Romanian-French artist André Cadere's *Barre de Bois Rond* (1972). These marvelous connecting lines, however playful, are again left with-

out much ground to stand on. Because they force highly individualistic and vastly divergent practices together into sweeping categories such as anti-institutionalism, conceptualism, feminism, and so forth, these sections feel normative and reductive.

Consider the placement side by side of works by Sanja Iveković, Ana Mendieta, Marina Abramović, Ewa Partum, Valie EXPORT, and Geta Brătescu. The wall text reads: "Influenced by the second wave of the women's liberation movement and the idea that feminism *is* politics, many performance and video art pioneers working in the 1960s and 1970s turned the camera on themselves to draw attention to the politics of gender construction, women's status in society, and the role of the media in shaping identity." These artists could have been replaced with any other female artists dealing with similar issues anywhere around the world during the early to mid-seventies. Similarly aleatory choices seem to drive several of the curatorial decisions in the succeeding galleries, leaving the viewer craving for more. Why was EXPORT, an artist whose work fits neither the Eastern European nor the Latin American taxonomy, included at all? Why did the curators choose to display Mendieta's *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints—Face)* (1972), and not her better-known *Silueta Series*? The latter could have been compellingly coupled with the photograph recording Abramović's *Rhythm 5* (1974), while *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints—Face)* could have picked up the thread of Brătescu's *Towards White (Self-Portrait in Seven Sequences)* (1974) if they were hung closer to each other. Likewise, Sanja Iveković's exquisite paper dolls could have engaged EXPORT's commodified bodies in a more direct manner, exploring the status of women in two of the most politicized countries bordering the Eastern Bloc (Austria and the former Yugoslavia). The inclusion of a significant number of women artists is certainly commendable; however, the exhibition fails to relate them to women's rights and issues, leaving a set of pressing questions unheard: What was the status of women in these societies? How did authoritarian regimes reflect gender inequality?

Notable, and perhaps inevitable, exclusions have been made: Central America is invisible, Chile features only briefly, and Cuba barely, especially given that these were some of the most significant loci of conflict between the two great spheres of influence during the Cold War. Yet the exhibition redeems itself, perhaps unintentionally, through its details—ideas with considerable traction, materializing through the most humble of means: a case full of fragile yet formidable

paper objects made in Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil, to be delivered by mail to a potentially infinite number of destinations around the world; a wall packed with richly designed posters from Eastern Europe and Latin America, revealing a decidedly transnational visual vocabulary.

The exhibition ends with Juan Downey's *Video Trans Americas* (1973–76): a group of fourteen monitors, each showing flickering fragments recorded on video, overlaid onto the outlines of a map of the Americas, and tracing the artist's journey from one end of the hemisphere to the other. The Chilean–New Yorker artist's transgressive and frenetic video montage sums up a number of the ideas proposed by the show, from transmission to connection, continuity and fragmentation.

INSTITUTIONAL DYNAMICS

Local art critics almost unanimously applauded the great span of the exhibition, which placed on view a pointed selection of non-Western acquisitions from the ever-expanding MoMA collections. Recent acquisitions in these areas are in sync with the shift toward global perspectives on art history in the academic and museological fields. While this repositioning reflects changing economic patterns that have impacted the exchange of cultural goods and the circulation of capital, the mechanics of these processes in the not-for-profit museum setting remain largely obscure.

Transmissions was accompanied by a series of public programs that included gallery talks; a film series ("Home Is Best: Latin American and Eastern European Rarities from MoMA," which consisted of a selection of narrative cinema, documentary, experimental, and authorial films from 1959 to 1974); as well as a class, "Other Stories: Art and Politics in Eastern Europe and Latin America," taught by art historian Ágnes Berecz. Research for the exhibition was consolidated by the Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives initiative, C-MAP for short, which, since its establishment in 2009, has worked on expanding the Museum's non-Western reach, both through scholarship and by bringing a significant number of acquisitions into the collection.[21]

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21 Several large-scale European and North American museums, including Tate Modern, the Guggenheim, and most recently the Metropolitan Museum of Art, support similar international initiatives. The Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative parallels MoMA's C-MAP program, although its corporate sponsor is included in its title. The expansion of already large-scale museums both nationally and internationally, such as the Guggenheim or the Met, depends on the internalization of global art terminology and its widespread use, as it is mobilized through the branding, promotion, and marketing apparatus.

A part of the International Program at MoMA, C-MAP was founded with the stated mission to examine "artistic modernism beyond the frameworks provided by Western European and North American avant-gardes."[22] Within this global setting, it has thus far focused on three regions "with a strong history of modernism," two of which form the focus of the exhibition at hand: Asia, Latin America, and Central and Eastern Europe.[23] Instead of an exhibition catalog, the primary resource available to contextualize the objects on view as part of Transmissions is the website Post: Notes on Modern and Contemporary Art around the World, which is edited by C-MAP. In a package of research files, C-MAP postdoctoral fellows Zanna Gilbert and Magdalena Moskalewicz have assembled a range of materials, from essays to interviews, conference papers, primary documents, discussions, responses, and comments, some authored by the exhibition curators, others by artists included in the exhibition, still others by international scholars and curators.[24] There was little wall text, however, especially considering that about half of the objects on view had only recently been acquired by the Museum and were being shown for the first time.[25]

Transmissions was certainly not the first exhibition of its kind, although comparative displays of art from Latin America and Eastern Europe are unusual. Other modern museums with collections of comparable size have shown similar ambitions, seeking to unpack the mod-

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22 MoMA International Programs, www.moma.org/learn/intnlprograms/globalresearch. The International Program was founded in 1952 and was responsible with promoting and touring MoMA exhibitions outside of the United States.

23 Ibid. While the countries generally identified as Central European are represented in the exhibition, the term has been left out of the exhibition title because it was less commonly used in the Cold War context. The problem is one of nomenclature, as the boundaries of these regions have been historically in flux, and remain contested. As Boris Groys has commented, "in fact, there is only one cultural experience that unites all Eastern European countries, and at the same time differentiates them from the outer world—it is the experience of Communism of the Soviet type. The notion of Eastern Europe is a legacy of the Cold War." See Boris Groys, "Haunted by Communism," in *Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe*, ed. Nikolaos Kotsopoulos (London: Black Dog, 2010), 18. For an extended discussion of the genealogies of art in Eastern Europe, see Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011).

24 Post entries are labeled and grouped according to common themes, "Transmissions" in this case. The Post files may indeed constitute an alternative type of catalog, textually rich, visually grounded, and more user-specific, due to the flexible digital format of the site.

25 MoMA, Department of Communications, "Transmissions" press release.

ern Western canon by reinstalling their permanent collections, or through special exhibitions. Recent examples include Multiple Modernities, 1905–1970, at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou (2014); How Far How Near—The World, at the Stedelijk (2014–15); and The World Goes Pop, at Tate Modern (2015–16). The curators of How Far How Near asked: "How can a limited geographic focus be reconciled with the universal values we customarily ascribe to art? And if we wish to broaden our outlook, how do we select?"[26] As is often the case, the all-encompassing scope of these collection-centered initiatives betrays the enduring cultural and economic legacy of Euro-American universalism.[27]

The World Goes Pop sought to open up hegemonic definitions of sixties and seventies Pop Art, most often associated with British, American, and French practices, by demarcating a broader international genealogy. Doubly politicized incarnations of non-Western (often anti-imperialist) and nonconsumerist practices were extrapolated in a color-rich comparative display that began under the assumption that, "If consumer culture was branded quintessentially American, it was in fact indelibly global."[28] Here too, however, the spectacular display pressed onto the field of vision the homogenizing screen of *appartenance* or belonging, confirmed by the consistency of formal language. Even the Metropolitan Museum, currently in the process of expanding its modern and contemporary program (the Met Breuer opened in March 2016), has redesigned its modern art galleries. This gesture forms part of a concerted effort to carve out the Met's place within a fiercely contested and rapidly changing museum field impacted by the global turn.

Another show, Subversive Practices, Art under Conditions of Political Repression: 60s–80s/South America/Europe, organized by

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26 "How Far How Near," exhibition webpage, Stedelijk Museum, September 19, 2014–February 1, 2015, accessed February 7, 2016, www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/how-far-how-near#sthash.QOZGIZP2.dpuf.

27 An important source for a multicentered discussion of the global museum in relation to both nationalism and cosmopolitanism is Peggy Levitt, *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

28 Jessica Morgan, "Political Pop: An Introduction," curatorial essay to The World Goes Pop, Tate Modern, 17 September, 2015–24 January, 2016, posted September 1, 2015, www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/ey-exhibition-world-goes-pop/jessica-morgan-political-pop-an-introduction.

the Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart and curated by Iris Dressler and Hans D. Christ in 2009, came closest to Transmissions in its comparative approach to contemporary Latin American and Eastern European art. The exhibition was the outcome of a research initiative not unlike C-MAP—Vivid Radical Memory (2005–7)—that brought together thirteen curators and scholars to explore multiple geographies and a range of fields. The show included a volume of work similar to that in Transmissions, around 300 pieces, from nine countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America, with additional works drawn from the former German Democratic Republic and the region of Catalonia, Spain. Notwithstanding its stated focus on Conceptual Art practices "generated under conditions of military dictatorship and of communist and socialist regimes in South America and Europe," that "not only called into question the traditional conception of art, the institution, or the relationship between art and the public but that were simultaneously posited against the existing political systems of power," the show included a greater variety of material than Transmissions. It was also more interdisciplinary and diverse, both formally and geographically, excavating "artistic practices of the so-called peripheries that were being marginalized and disregarded within the Western canon."[29] In its attempt to destabilize the rigid geopolitical and identitarian categories so often assumed in the historiography of postwar cultural relations, the project was more successful than Transmissions.

Transmissions, in its turn, registered mostly on two levels; first as a compelling provocation, and second as a missed opportunity. An alternative historiographical approach could have foregrounded the investigation of diagonal relations between Eastern Europe and Latin America. The sequence of interstitial spaces, nodes, linkages, and networks that might have bypassed Western-centered discourse and institutions remained, however, insufficiently researched. Instead of seeking patterns of influence, a decentered approach would need to rely upon more intuitive connections, highlighting the many ways in which different histories can be brought to bear upon each other. Above all, in order to present an effective critique, the very parameters that frame institutional discourses, global or otherwise, would need

29 Iris Dressler, "Subversive Practices, Art under Conditions of Political Repression: 60s–80s/South America/Europe," in Christ and Dressler, *Subversive Practices*, 38.

to be drafted anew. In Cristina Freire's words: "we need other criteria, not the ones we get from hegemonic history."[30]

To sum up, more specific curatorial choices could have been made, even if only by suggesting parallel rather than convergent histories. Considering the persistence of alternative analog practices alongside the accelerated proliferation of mass media and communications technologies from the sixties onward, more space could have been given to the subversive appeal of multichannel video technology, and to the exploration of Mail Art and the circulation of ideas in print. The curators might also have placed less emphasis on formal similarities, and instead privileged fortuitous correspondences that reveal shared sensitivities. The show also fell short in its lack of attention to the sociocultural and political contexts from which each of the exhibited works emerged: in both regions, the political nature of the work was often overdetermined by the conservatism of local art institutions and by state censorship. Excavating these histories is perhaps more urgent now than ever.

30 Zdenka Badovinac, Eda Čufer, Cristina Freire, Boris Groys, Charles Harrison, Vít Havránek, Piotr Piotrowski, and Branka Stipančić, "Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe: Part I," *e-flux Journal*, no. 40 (December 2012).