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ARTISTIC RUPTURES AND THEIR 'COMMUNIST' GHOSTS

On the post-communist condition as threshold experience
in art from and in Eastern Europe

Magda Schmukalla

PhD in Psychosocial Studies

2017

Birkbeck,
University of London

To my parents

**I hereby declare that this thesis is entirely my own work and contributions
from other persons are fully cited and referenced.**

ABSTRACT

This thesis theorizes and explores the post-communist condition as a threshold experience. While scholars in the social sciences and humanities have often criticized the notion of post-communism for reproducing discursively the East/West divide, this study argues that it is precisely from within the post-communist threshold that the current hegemonic role of the West can be effectively challenged.

I begin by showing how the post-communist condition captures an intense experience of being undone and how, with the abrupt breakdown of a communist order and a gradual return to a capitalist structure, the main pillars of modern subjectivities in Eastern European countries have been fundamentally disturbed. As a consequence ‘post-communist sites’ have turned into places or relations in which ghostly relics of past experiences suddenly crop up with no ideological structure being strong enough to control their haunting. The ghosts returning in this state of collective uncertainty do, however, not only disturb today’s Eastern European site but also, I argue, make the Western subject feel haunted by its ‘post-communist Eastern European other’.

My aim is further to explore this particular threshold experience on its own terms. In this study the entry point to its transitory realm is therefore neither theory, nor quantitative or qualitative data but the elusive, contradictory, and often very personal realm of contemporary art. By drawing on Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* I discuss how artworks can be understood as mediators of threshold experiences and how an artistic form of reading particular artworks can allow us to ‘speak’ and think from within such liminal states.

I then explore the phenomenological and relational reality of the post-communist threshold through selected artworks, all of which engage in one way or the other with the post-communist site. These readings of ‘post-communist artworks’ lead me through an array of contemporary critical and psychoanalytic theory and make me discuss questions about better worlds, alternative ethics and the politics of art in ways that evade common forms of theoretical and empirical analysis. For although the post-communist condition is a state of extreme disarray, it is also a state of being that contains the potential for an alternative epistemology and equally the potential for transformation. The post-communist threshold, I argue, is thus an opportunity to start thinking about ‘communism’ and radical politics again – and differently.

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Trying to speak from a place that never was ...

At some point at the very beginning of this project my father visited me in London. I took advantage of this occasion and asked him to tell me about life under communism. It felt odd. While he would usually just start talking about it, this time, maybe for the first time ever, it was me who called him into the role of the eye witness, trying to archive an image of what communism meant to him. We both sensed the unusual formality of this moment but were each of us determined to take up our roles; me to comply with my father's inner desire to make me understand the inhuman and grotesque conditions that had made him decide to leave communist Poland; him to tell the whole story properly and not in casual fragments. We tried, but the aura of this family-historical moment disappeared quickly. Instead of his usual anecdotes about himself as anti-authoritarian character, who would constantly clash with the structure of a brutal communist system – stories that were sometimes tragic, sometimes funny or grotesque and told of his creative ideas how to circumvent regulations and the state apparatus – this time the experience of communism was reduced to generalized statements only: ‘Communism was something one cannot imagine, a catastrophe, etc. ...’ I realized how I drifted away.

If stories start at specific places then maybe the place that describes the beginning of this story best is the rather unusual ‘place’ of this failure of speech that characterized not only this particular conversation between me and my father but many of the conversations we have had or were trying

to have: my father speaking, me drifting away – and yet something stayed with me after these attempted encounters; something that would not let me be; something ‘more’ or ‘unknown’ and eventually something that would make me start working on this project.

I was born in Poland, in Gdańsk, two months before the historical Solidarność strikes which were among a chain of events that would lead to the breakdown of the communist states in the East. My father often told me how he had taken me as a newborn to strike meetings. In fact, he very often told me about the strikes – how crucial they were in the breakdown of the communist regime and how many obstacles he had to overcome in order to take part in this crucial uprising. A few years after the strikes we emigrated to West Germany. My parents at that time certainly knew that for the time being a return to Poland, where the political and economic situation had become even more uncertain and dangerous, was impossible. I, as a three-year old, on the other hand, probably did not know what was happening around me – at least I don’t remember.

So whenever my father would later tell me about Solidarność and the difficult process of emigration that my parents had risked to rebuild our lives outside the communist East, he was telling me something that was related to the time and the place from where I had started my journey in this world – a place which however, since our emigration to Germany, had turned into something I could not really reach, not comprehend, nor explore. When listening to my father’s stories I thus might have secretly, unconsciously, hoped to find my own story – or at least the beginning of it. But when telling about his experiences and indirectly about my beginning, the narrative he sought to transmit had a clear temporal direction. We had moved from a place that had been unbearable and we were now living in a place that was good – if not the best humanity could ever achieve. It was a place of freedom, where I could become whoever I wanted. So even if there was a willingness to speak about the past and its relation to our present life, the scripts and the temporalities in which these stories developed were fixed. Exploring our history in these family conversations through unknown paths or new interpretations, initiated by questions not covered in the narratives presented, or changing the temporal direction of the perspective applied, felt impossible. The time enacted in my father’s speech was deliberately chosen to direct me further away from the communist site in the past, while I listened in order to become able to return to a place from where I thought I might be able to fill the gaps in an image of my self, which seemed so difficult to form despite all the wealth and opportunities a life in the West had to offer.

This is how 'communism' as an alternative or 'other' place in the past, but potentially also as a name for a different future, has started following me in a way that my father probably had not intended when he tried to pass on his view of history. It has become some kind of a melancholic object signifying both a lost past, which could not be recovered, as well as a lost future, which in some way had already been realized. From the place we had arrived at after our 'escape' from the East it seemed as if there was no way back nor forward. History had arrived together with us at a place that was called 'freedom' and the aim was not anymore to achieve 'freedom' or a 'better world' but to defend and protect it.

At the beginning of this project I thus imagined it as a thesis on the experience of communism. More precisely, I thought to bring together the two concepts (freedom and communism) that were over-represented while being placed in stark contradiction to each other in the narratives I had been confronted with for so many years. I imagined a project that would allow me to explore the communist experience in a way that it could be still understood as a glimpse or taste of freedom despite the brutal tragedy it had turned into. I must have felt that something of communism, something of my beginning in this world, could still be rescued or retrieved. However, I gradually realized how the main queries driving this project were much closer to the now than the then. They were closer to the bewilderment caused by the experience of having been brought up around anti-communist narratives by parents who had spent most of their life within a communist environment – and who so often guided me, educated me, judged me, without being aware of it, according or against a communist structure; its ethics, its violence, and its social and economic infrastructure, which they so often saw all around themselves while I only saw their alienation from the challenges I was facing in a capitalist West without any past or future I could move towards.

So eventually it is this fissure, this specific socio-historical and geopolitical crack as a liminal, psychosocial 'place' on the European continent, situated between places and between generations and present between me and my parents in a very particular and personal form, that has become the starting point, the object, and finally also the voice of this study.

Introduction

This project theorizes and explores the post-communist condition as a threshold experience – i.e. as a transient and elusive historical experience that was triggered by the breakdown of the communist states in Eastern Europe and their gradual replacement by a neoliberal, national order after 1989. Although Soviet-type communism¹ had not been able to create the better world it once had promised, communist states affiliated with the Soviet Union had their own political, economic, and cultural structure as well as their own historical narratives and identity categories, which were set out to replace the capitalist environment these countries had regarded officially as overdue. The ‘communism’ or ‘socialism’ created in Eastern Europe had thus transported people living in these countries towards a post-capitalist environment and time, where life felt and was lived in a very different way from the life known on the Western side of the Iron Curtain. ‘Communism’ thus existed or was in the process of being created in the multiple yet specific ‘Soviet’ ways in which people were taught about history, the ways property and work was organized, the ways people produced and interacted with art, or the ways in which communist states fantasized and presented their Western ‘other’. With the sudden breakdown of this communist structure all these far reaching and unprecedented societal pillars started to disintegrate and the once ‘communist’ countries readapted to a capitalist structure which from then on was used to redefine and recreate the new status quo.

Institutions and people in Eastern Europe have found various solutions or coping mechanisms for how to deal with and make sense of this abrupt return to a structure that for decades has been presented officially as part of an unretrievable as well as undesired history.² Intense identifications

1 My aim here is not to define what the actual political and economic structure of these states was, nor to suggest that there could be a coherent definition of the Soviet system that would apply to all Eastern European countries in the same way. The aim is instead to highlight that broadly speaking the system that structured social reality in the communist East was different from the social and economical system in the West. This system was, as Owen Hatherley has put it, ‘founded upon a ‘planned’ or ‘command’ economy, depending on who you believe, which has full nationalization of all (or almost all) land and industry, in which private interest has no role whatsoever in urban and regional planning, a system which was in theory either a ‘people’s democracy’ or the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, and in practice either the dictatorship of one dubiously sane individual or the dictatorship of functionaries; one which oscillated culturally between relative freedom and ideological conformity, between internationalism and practically atavistic appeals to local tradition.’ Owen Hatherley, *Landscapes of Communism: A History Through Buildings* (London: Allen Lane, 2015), 30.

2 A wide range of fascinating, critical studies in anthropology, history, and cultural studies gives a good insight into the complexities of the ways in which this transition has found expression in personal and official narratives on the post-communist present as well as the socialist/communist past. See for instance: Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, NJ; Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1996); Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery, eds., *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World* (New York;

with the capitalist, global West or reactionary embracements of nationalist or Christian ideologies, or nostalgic returns to an imagined communist past are all developments that have been observed as characteristic or symptomatic for the transitions in countries that used to belong to the Soviet East.³ But while many scholars have focused on the diverse ways in which the post-communist transition has found expression in new or recovered narratives, subject positions, and forms of everyday life this study focuses on the *experience* of the transition itself.

What this project seeks to explore is the post-communist threshold as an experience of crisis which is set at the in-between of established modern structures, its discourses and identities, and which emerged when one societal frame started being replaced by another. A crisis is triggered when a known social order suddenly loses its meaning while the new order is not strong enough yet to cover up and end the confusion created in individual life stories, social relations, collective fantasies, or public sites. The transitions triggered by the breakdown of Soviet communism in the 'former East' after 1989 have initiated such a crisis in an intensified and unprecedented way. Eastern European countries have been going through a communist period which was supposed to replace or sublimate the capitalist status quo; it was supposed to initiate another radical break in the historical development of civilization, with the Soviet world creating the frame for an alternative, better future. The sudden return to an order which for years had been suggested as overdue, as well as the numerous and often traumatic experiences with 'real' communism have crucially destabilized the fantasy of modern progress and of the continuity or linearity of historical time. Instead of exploring what I call solutions or symptoms of this sudden crisis my aim here is to suggest that we should attempt to pay attention to the confusing reality of these transitory states of being. For it is from this, historically specific and disturbing post-communist threshold and the particular experiences of not being able to apply or activate an existing, modern ideological frame that, as I will argue, new and transformative ways of knowing our past and future can be retrieved.

Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999); Kristen Ghodsee, *Lost in Transition: Ethnographies of Everyday Life After Communism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Marta Rabikowska, ed., *The Everyday of Memory: Between Communism and Post-Communism* (Oxford; Berlin: Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2013); Julia Obertreis and Anke Stephan, eds., *Erinnerungen nach der Wende: oral history und (post)sozialistische Gesellschaften = Remembering after the fall of communism: oral history and (post-)socialist societies* (Essen: Klartext, 2009). On the phenomenon of post-communist nostalgia see: Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, *Post-Communist Nostalgia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

3 See for instance: Gert Pickel and Kornelia Sammet, eds., *Transformation of Religiosity: Religion and Religiosity in Eastern Europe 1989 - 2010* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2012); Joakim Ekman and Jonas Linde, 'Communist Nostalgia and the Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 21, no. 3 (2005); Jan Kubik and Amy Linch, eds., *Postcommunism from Within: Social Justice, Mobilization, and Hegemony* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).

In this respect, I am going to discuss the post-communist condition as a threshold experience that is characterized by a loss of temporal orientation – i.e. as an experienced loss of a common time, of a common historical narrative, or of a shared sense of where and when in history we are to be located. Bereft of such a mutual and continuous sense of time, the post-communist condition as discussed in this study thus emerges in the form of uncanny places and uncanny encounters, both of which unleash unknown or repressed realities for which there is no comprehensive existing frame that could accommodate their contradictory and confusing ghostly dynamic. Consequently, most of the times this specific crisis is noticed, if at all, as an unwanted and disturbing interruption, break, or crack in what we in Europe might imagine to be a consistent, continuous, or complete development of a modern ‘Western world’.⁴ And as such an experience of the collapse of existing modern structures or ideologies the post-communist condition does not only haunt the Eastern European site but, as I will argue, it also disturbs its Western European other. For what we see through this post-communist transition is what we as modern subjects in the West and East would prefer not to be confronted with.

Post-communist thresholds allow us to know ourselves and our time differently. They open us to cultural experiences and material realities of the ‘Western world’ (in Eastern as well as Western Europe) that we are usually unaware of or keep repressed. This project seeks to find ways of ‘speaking’ and ‘thinking’ from within such transitory post-communist sites and asks what we can say about ‘other’ or ‘new’ worlds, about past or future dreamworlds and catastrophes, about new beginnings or endings as well as about different and ethical ways of relating to the ‘other’ when assessing the status quo from within their liminal sphere. With the breakdown of communism our ability to talk and think creatively about alternative futures as well as to relate to the past and present in unprecedented ways, has been inhibited. It is the post-communist realm, with its transient, chaotic, and contradictory dynamic, that may help us to explore how we can start imagining new beginnings and better worlds again – this time, however, under the disturbing and at times painful impression of a disintegrating communist world, which, as I will show, leaves traces of various kinds – and in various places.

Another aim of this project is therefore also to theorize and analyze this particular state of crisis on its own terms; not unifying it into a new category, identity, or discourse but attempting to access its

4 As I will argue below, this study seeks to deconstruct common ways of using the categories ‘West’ and ‘East’. It does so, however, not by replacing these signifiers with other words or concepts, but by exploring their meaning and function through the post-communist crisis which allows us to question the static and non-historical character these terms have acquired in hegemonic discourses.

transitory, ambiguous, and incoherent reality through a methodological approach that is as contradictory as the post-communist state of confusion. The post-communist condition as theorized in this study is an intensely experienced fissure in the coherence of modern narratives and identities and the aim is to find conceptual and methodological means that allow for its disturbing character to be preserved. Such a research approach requires methods that, as John Law has put it, ‘no longer seek to the definite, the repeatable, the more or less stable,’⁵ but that are as elusive and fragile as the object they seek to explore and know. My entry point to this liminal state is therefore not theory, neither qualitative nor quantitative data, but the sensual, intuitive, non-discursive, and often very personal realm of contemporary art. It is artworks that shall allow me to explore post-1989 realities in Europe from within this threshold. As such this project has not only become an exploration of the post-communist condition as a peculiar type of historical experience, but also an exploration or imagination of a peculiar type of methodology; of thought and research being closely aligned with art; of a critical or psychosocial theory that starts with the art event and tries to find its way out of the struggle and confusion triggered by art projects instead of speaking from the secure, structured, and coherent environment of established, critical discourse.

Three parts and two beginnings

This thesis is structured into three parts; understanding the way this structure has taken on its current form or constellation may help in understanding the object of this study in the particular way I am attempting to construct it. I begin the argument in Chapter One by exploring the critical potentiality of art as theorized by Theodor W. Adorno and discuss how we can comprehend contemporary artworks and the confusing artistic events they create when looked at through this modern approach. The chapter argues that art speaks about the object or reality in ways that escape discursive thought. Art has the potential to confront us, at the level of its artistic form, with realities we usually repress or cannot know. It ideally grasps a knowledge of the object which results from a different, artistic relation to this object and therefore also actualizes a different form of subjectivity. It is not by identifying and controlling the object through concepts but by mimicking it artistically that the object can be ‘known’ through art as an unposited, non-identical reality – thus as something that is ‘known’ although it escapes our cognitive means to know it.

By starting the project with an exploration of the epistemological and critical potential of art instead of entering directly the realm of the post-communist site I document or trace the way my argument

5 John Law, *After Method - Mess in Social Science Research* (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), 6.

on the post-communist condition evolved. It was my exploration of art's potential to critique established epistemologies and to offer some kind of alternative 'knowledge' that made me start thinking the post-communist condition as a liminal historical experience which disrupts existing discourses and which therefore opens us to experiences that escape common ways of understanding the socio-political shifts around 1989. I thus started thinking the state of in-betweenness that art triggers and from which it communicates as something that is akin to the in-betweenness, i.e. the crisis in existing subjectivities and structures, that is created through the post-communist transition. Without my work on the critical potentiality of art the object of this study would have therefore not emerged in the form in which I ended up exploring it here.⁶

The second part of the study consists of a critical discussion of the notions 'post-communism' and 'post-communist art' in order to explore how we can think these specific states and modes of expression as threshold experiences. I start by analyzing the different ways the notion of post-communism has been used so far and explain why this notion, together with discursive constructs that go along with it, such as 'Eastern Europe' or the 'former East', have been often met with suspicion by critical theorists (Chapter Two). As I will show, many have argued that the concept of post-communism reproduces a colonial relation between the West (Western Europe and North America) and the so-called 'former East'.⁷ I, however, suggest that the notion of post-communism and with it that of post-communist art also contains a critical and subversive potentiality. For this to happen it has to be conceptualized and understood as a liminal experience – i.e. as an intensified experience of being undone without having become yet someone else. I then develop this idea further by looking more closely at the phenomenon of post-communist art, the way it has been explored in art historical and art theoretical discourses and how it could be comprehended as an expression of the post-communist threshold (Chapter Three).

6 This specific genealogy also shows how the present study differs, for instance, from Anca Pusca's work on post-communist aesthetics. While each of us seeks to theorize and explore the post-communist transition as a threshold experience which allows us to know the post-1989 transitions in a critical way it is the difference in our methodological and epistemological approach that makes us explore very distinct relations, images, and 'returns' as characteristic of the post-communist site. Anca Pusca, *Post-Communist Aesthetics: Revolutions, Capitalism, Violence* (London: Routledge, 2015).

7 I discuss this aspect of the debate around the notion of post-communism and the contributions of the following researchers in chapter two: Natasa Kovacevic, *Narrating Post-Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe's Borderline Civilization* (London: Routledge, 2008); Boris Buden, *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009); Bojana Pejic, 'The Dialectics of Normality', in *After the Wall - Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, ed. Bojana Pejic and David Elliott (Stockholm: Moderna museet, 1999); Hana Cervinkova, 'Postcolonialism, Postsocialism and the Anthropology of East-Central Europe', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48, no. 2 (May 2012): 155–63.

In this respect, my project is related to what the research platform Former West has been set out to do but it seeks to occupy and explore a perspective often evaded in the discursive space created by this research community. Former West is a transdisciplinary community of artists, art critics, academics, and activists who explore the contemporary global status quo as it emerged after the breakdown of the communist East in order to ‘former’ the West. This means that it seeks to advance discourses and methods which contribute to an imaginary and actual undoing of the West’s hegemonic role in today’s global society.⁸ But whereas Former West deliberately avoids the position of the ‘former East’ – either as a subject position or as a specific form of historical experience – I try to place this transitory reality right at the centre of my argument. For if we want to deconstruct and undo the West in its current violent and colonial form it is precisely the position of this transient ‘other Europe’, and the experienced lack or loss of historical continuity and coherence triggered by it, that challenges, as I will argue, the fantasy of a West that has seemingly survived the 1989 transition unharmed.

The third part of the thesis contains the chapters that engage with concrete art historical sites and with particular artworks *as* post-communist. These chapters explore how we can think in a speculative, artistic way about the present moment, its relation to the past and possible futures, and about ‘other’ or ethical ways of relating to ‘otherness’ when trying to speak from within the transitory sphere of the post-communist site as we find it mediated in post-communist artworks. From here my argument travels through various relics of modern fantasies and visions, through remnants of our desire for revolutionary change as well as through memories of modern forms of political activism. Fragments of fantasized or experienced versions of the communist utopia, of Zionism, or of the revolutionary power of social movements are triggered in artistic images that recall a familiar hope for radical political change. Alongside relics of modern political dreams my chapters also engage with fragments of the political avant-garde and its radical ideas of an art practice that has the potential to change existing societies towards something better. All these events and modern imaginaries, which in one way or another have influenced what has become the ‘former East’, and which still linger in its transient post-communist realm, return in these post-communist artworks as unprocessed relics, calling for understanding in the face of the experienced and abrupt breakdown of European communism.

⁸ Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh, eds., *Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989* (Utrecht; Cambridge, MA and London: BAK; MIT Press, 2016).

Besides these returns of modern dreamworlds these artworks, however, also and increasingly confront us with experiences of the brutal and overwhelming catastrophes that have shaped modern European life in the twentieth century – above all the Holocaust and the experience of World War Two, but also the scars inflicted by authoritarian movements and regimes that once promised the struggling masses of modern societies to be the harbinger of a better world in the future. What we therefore are confronted with through these artworks are, as I will argue, the immanent and experienced contradictions of the history of modern, enlightened societies in Europe. Post-communist artworks confront us with the historical deadlock at which the Western world has arrived and which today's European societies try to ignore, while the post-communist transition throws them up in unexpected, disturbing, and intensified ways.

I unfold each of the artworks discussed in Part Three by tracing and exploring the visual and conceptual images they work with. I follow the artworks to public sites or historical places they integrate in their artistic constellation and make these sites part of my argument. I discuss the experiences these artworks triggered in me and others by using various 'alternative' concepts, temporalities, or forms of identification, which come to my help when trying to understand what these artworks internalize and express. And I also allow for my readings of artworks to integrate and accommodate political, social, and personal developments that happened in the course of this study.

Chapter Four begins this critical exploration of post-communist art with a discussion of art phenomena in post-1989 Poland. It argues that post-communist art from Poland allows us a different view on the historical avant-garde and its political demands. Socialist Realism has had a traumatic effect on artists in Eastern Europe but so did specific forms of modern autonomous art, which in the context of a communist structure had acquired a specific meaning. The post-communist transition brings these unprocessed and contradictory experiences from the art world to the fore. It makes us return to the radical demands of the historical avant-garde in order to comprehend the hopes and tragedies of an engaged, political art anew, and, on top of that, in a different way than usually done in established, hegemonic conceptions of contemporary art and the neo-avant-garde in 'the West'.

In Chapter Five I explore how two artworks, Yael Bartana's ... *And Europe will be Stunned* (2011) and Joana Rajkowska's *Oxygenator* (2007), open us to the realities of material post-communist sites in Warsaw, which I describe as places that after 1989 have not been integrated into the new urban

environment but that have also not kept their previous function in people's everyday life. While attempting to speak or act from within these transitory sites each of these artworks seems to revive in its own way relics of some kind of modern hope for a better world while simultaneously confronting us with the traumatic disappearance of Jewish communities from Europe. What these artworks show us or make us experience, is how the modern subject seeks to destroy what or whom it regards as other and how as a consequence of this destructive element it ceases to be able to exist itself – or how the completeness and coherence it seeks for eventually implies its own dissolution.

In Chapter Six Freud's concept of the 'double' and the uncanny encounters it is associated with helps me to explore and unfold the event of the 7th Berlin Biennale (2012) and explain why this event, which can be seen as a post-communist art event outside of Eastern Europe, has been perceived and shelved as an artistic and political failure. Similar to the way Western discourses disregard the communist experiments in the East as a self-evident failure, this biennale has been rejected by its mainly Western audience as an art event that neither met its artistic nor its political ambitions. I argue that the negative perception and assessment of this event can be understood as an expression of an unexpected experience of the West's own undoing or unbecoming in the encounter with this strange yet familiar art. This uncanny element characterizing the reception of this biennale becomes particularly clear in the reactions triggered by one specific artwork of the biennale in which the unruliness and uncontrollable nature of a birth is placed symbolically against the socio-historical landscape of Berlin (*Born in Berlin*, Joanna Rajkowska).

The interplay of returning traumatic experiences and the simultaneous return of the desire and need for new beginnings also structures the seventh and last chapter. Here Mirosław Bałka's site-specific 'Traumdeutung' installations, which he created in 'known' and familiar places in London, made me explore how psychoanalytic understandings of dreams and awakenings (Freud, Lacan) may allow us to comprehend post-communist ruptures or cracks as a possibility to confront ourselves with experiences that go beyond our ability to know. At the same time, however, these art installations create in us some kind of understanding of the inevitability to respond to such traumatic experiences. Awakenings triggered by post-communist, artistic interventions may then be understood as a possibility for an ethical relation to a past we fail to connect or relate to while being haunted by it in a ghostly or uncanny way. Freud's non-Jewish reading of the Jewish beginning (*Moses and Monotheism*, 1939) as one of the narratives triggered by Bałka's artistic situations allows me to end this study with a speculative account on how we may 'begin' and thus change every time we manage to articulate something that cannot be said.

Transdisciplinarity and psychosocial studies

This project is a psychosocial study. It seeks to explore subjectivities and societal realities as they emerge outside of the discursive realm offered by traditional disciplines such as psychology, sociology, or history. It therefore attempts to know contemporary societal life, the experiences it is shaped by and the material and cultural realities it creates, from within a trans- or even non-disciplinary space, which is placed at the ‘out there’ of existing master-disciplines. In attempting to develop an argument from within this non-disciplinary space this study therefore resists following the conceptual and methodological frames and borders of existing disciplines, but it also avoids settling in a new shelter next to them.⁹ Psychosocial studies as understood here does therefore not offer us an alternative perspective or structure on specific realities that are not captured by other disciplines but it is an intellectual and critical intervention that seeks to break with existing forms of doing research and of knowing the object.¹⁰ Instead of conceptualizing alternative discourses it seeks to remain within the unstable, fragmented, and mobile environment of unsettled, contradictory, and unknown thought (the ‘out there’) in order to open us to experiences and realities that usually escape established disciplines and discourses through which we usually seek to know the world.

In doing psychosocial research, in resisting using the paths and instruments offered by master-disciplines and instead wandering around often for long periods helplessly and confused in unlit environments, we thus create a temporary ‘trans-space’. But while being a constraint or restriction in some regard, this particular research space created from within a continuous critique of known intellectual sites can be a source for creative research in another – it provides a ‘freedom to move around intellectually, sampling and garnering material and ideas as needed, without necessarily feeling completely absorbed in any one way of thinking.’¹¹ In this particular study it has been art that has made me move around, sample and garner concepts, images, and objects, and visit sites I

9 Lisa Baraitser, ‘Temporal Drag: Transdisciplinarity and the “Case” of Psychosocial Studies’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 32, no. 5–6 (1 September 2015): 207–31.

10 In this respect, I understand the critical endeavor of psychosocial studies as closely aligned and in solidarity with the work of researchers who try to move beyond the borders and frames of their ‘home’ discipline – who therefore try to change and deconstruct their discipline from within. See for instance the transgressive and critical debates placed around the discipline of sociology (*The Sociological Review* 60, no. 1 [2012]). Psychosocial studies is then not so much to be understood as a ‘home’ for these various attempts of critical and creative research, but as a specific critical approach that focuses on alternative forms of constructing and exploring subjectivities; or as a critical approach that is ‘interested in articulating a place of “suture” between elements whose contribution to the production of the human subject is normally theorized separately.’ Stephen Frosh and Lisa Baraitser, ‘Psychoanalysis and Psychosocial Studies’, *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 13, no. 4 (2008): 348.

11 Stephen Frosh, ‘Towards a Psychosocial Psychoanalysis’, *American Imago* 73, no. 4 (2016): 479.

would have otherwise not gone or paid attention to. Art has allowed me to conceptualize the post-communist condition in a way that seeks to preserve aspects of its ambiguous and transient character. It has enabled me to construct an intellectual contribution to understanding the meaning of this particular historical experience not by picking up existing discourses but by attempting to think and write through the contradictory, aporetic, and disturbing experiences triggered by specific artworks – all of which have in one way or the other engaged with the post-communist site. Artworks have the potential to disrupt common ways of knowing objects or events and as such they can open up new points of departure to understand and discuss phenomena we have grown used to control or colonize through existing discourses. They allow us to walk around places and along temporalities without having the right maps, compasses, clocks, or measure instruments at hand. And when moving around in this ‘trans-space’ we do not seek to find ways, but we mainly aim to get lost, stumble, or even fall or fail in order to arrive at places and times we have learned to evade or ignore.

This means that although the study begins with a detailed discussion of Adornian art theory it does not do so to set up a theoretical frame that will then be applied to specific sites or cases, neither does it seek to create a traditional contribution to Adornian scholarship from the perspective of a philosopher or critical theorist. It rather uses this beginning to drag Adorno’s text towards this risky trans-space. I work with Adorno’s text by reading it closely while occasionally expanding my reading by secondary literature that helps me to shed light where the text itself remains difficult to grasp, but I also take the risk of big speculative leaps. Adorno lends me a language to begin my exploration of the critical potential of contemporary art but what I end up saying in his language does not necessarily express what we have become used to hearing from the historical figure Adorno – and yet he also does not disappear. With this idea of contemporary art that ‘speaks’ about truth from a space in-between, or from within a crisis of what we thought we knew for certain about ourselves and the world, I then move on towards the realm of the post-communist site. I explore it conceptually and through the particular worlds created by artworks in order to allow it to speak as an ‘other ‘ or liminal site. I thus sample and garner: I stumble into anthropological, cultural, and memory studies; I move around philosophy and psychoanalytic theory not because I know or found the path, but because I pick up the associations and imaginary directions triggered by artworks, and then stick them together, creating a montage or constellation as an expression of my journey through this trans-space that allows me to think about Europe and the West through the liminal experience of the post-communist site.

This way of wandering through research material in order to get lost does however not mean that there are no coordinates, but again, coordinates as used in this study do not primarily serve the purpose to remain on the right track, but rather to arrive at places that are not registered in maps. This is why I decided to use the term ‘post-communist’ or ‘post-communism’ when describing or pointing towards the transitory phase in Eastern Europe instead of alternative terms such as ‘post-socialist’ or ‘post-Soviet’. While many have argued that the term post-communism is confusing or even wrong because it suggests that the Soviet system had actually been structured around Marxist or communist ideals (an argument that has been particularly popular in Western left-wing circles), or because it ignores the fact that Soviet states had regarded communism as a time that was ascribed to the future and not their present pre-1989 state, I argue that it is precisely this confusing and contradictory materiality of the signifier ‘post-communism’ that will allow us to explore this specific socio-historical transition as a liminal experience or experience of crisis (see Chapter Two). The other coordinate that I have decided to keep deliberately although my argument has increasingly and unexpectedly directed me towards the transitory site of Eastern Europe more generally is ‘Poland’ - the sites and artworks I discuss and explore are all in some way, although often weirdly, linked to the Eastern European site ‘Poland’. This, however, is not, as I will argue at the end of Chapter Three, because Poland is particularly suitable for ‘knowing’ the post-communist condition, but because it is ‘Poland’ where I as a researcher get lost best.

PART I

A beginning

Chapter One

Art and thought from beyond the frame

An 'Adornian' take on the relation between aesthetic experience and critical thought in and through contemporary art

The aim of this chapter is to introduce an approach to art that theorizes art as an instigator of aesthetic experiences which require new thoughts about ourselves and the world. Art triggers overwhelming encounters with repressed or unknown/unconceptualized aspects of our reality and thus challenges existing ways of knowing and interacting with the world. As such, I argue, art can be an initiator of dialectical and eventually also speculative arguments which aim to discuss and explore reality from undefined, unexplored, and unknown vantage points. I develop this position through a discussion of Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) and its relevance for contemporary art practice. The boundary expanding works of contemporary artists do not, I argue, annul Adorno's art theory but demand its radicalization. What makes an artwork autonomous is then not the aesthetic and non-discursive form of a closed art-object but the specific form of aesthetic experiences triggered by today's 'open' artworks against the increasingly mechanized and reified encounters that characterize social life in advanced capitalist societies.

Benjamin and Adorno: Two spotlights on the dialectics of cultural production in advanced capitalism

In March 1936 Walter Benjamin sent a manuscript of his famous artwork essay *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproducibility* to his intellectual friend Adorno.¹² The main argument of his essay was that the technological reproducibility of images had turned social reality into something increasingly permeable and amendable. Technology had created new material forms of existence that had the potential to abolish the exploitative and alienating conditions of capitalist societies and turn these into democratic and enlightened structures.¹³ So far, Benjamin argued, these new technologies had however been mostly used to strengthen the power relations of the status quo. Fascist and reactionary movements deployed film and photography in order to satisfy the masses without actually changing the conditions under which a majority of people were suffering more and more. But these new art forms, Benjamin insisted, could still actualize technology's progressive force in their own specific way and by doing so allow for a temporary realization and actualization of a social reality under new conditions. Identifying and naming these progressive potentialities of film and photography in concepts that could not be used by fascist and reactionary movements was thus the main aim pursued by Benjamin in this essay.

Consequently, he described how the technological reproduction of images had created cultural objects that were not any longer bound to a specific space and time and which were lacking an authenticity that traditional artworks had been characterized by. These new reproducible images were also not any longer dependent on the auratic and mythical status of the traditional painting which had required a certain set of ritualized behavior by an admiring audience to be valued and accepted as art. Instead, these new, disenchanting objects were withdrawn from the sphere of tradition and their static place in history. Objects captured by the objective mechanism of a camera could be copied, enlarged, cut, merged with others, and taken to any possible place or context. Simultaneously, the audience created in a cinema space experienced itself as a collective and democratic subject of a kind not achievable outside of the cinema. Through common laughter and sadness about the narrative presented to it, this utopian 'cinema subject' was no longer oppressed by laws it could not possess or understand, but was in the position of judging whether these laws,

12 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility', in *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 251–83.

13 Benjamin developed his argument around a Marxist analysis of capitalist societies according to which the latter were characterized by an increased exploitation and alienation of the proletariat but at the same time were creating the conditions necessary for their own abolition. The cultural sphere was one area of social life in which this development could be observed and shaped.

experienced through the cinematic narrative, matched the needs and desires of those whose lives they determined.

Adorno's response to Benjamin was, as is widely known, very critical. Although agreeing with Benjamin on how the dialectical self-dissolution of myth and its replacement by modern structures and technologies could be traced in the 'disenchantment of art'¹⁴ Adorno criticized Benjamin mainly and excessively for his treatment of autonomous art. He accused him for having placed the autonomous artwork on one side with traditional, auratic and thus reactionary art. Against Benjamin Adorno argued that the autonomous artwork had to be rescued in the same way as Benjamin had tried to rescue the American mass movie from its reactionary use by fascist movements. Both kitsch film as well as the autonomous artwork, Adorno argued, had to be considered in their dialectical relation to the conditions of capitalist societies. Both low as well as high culture,¹⁵ as the extremes of contemporary cultural production, Adorno wrote to Benjamin, 'bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change (but never, of course, simply as a middle term between Schönberg and the American film).'¹⁶ They were 'torn halves of an integral freedom' that could not be realized under present conditions. As such broken and dialectical entities autonomous artworks were important sources of societal change since either, kitsch film as well as autonomous artwork, had the potential for creating so called 'Chockerfahrungen' - experiences of shock – which disturbed and distracted ritualized forms of behavior and thought instead of blindly reproducing them.

Shock was in this regard understood by Adorno as the unsettling moment that was triggered by withdrawn, autonomous artworks as well as by the montage of images created in a film as depicted by Benjamin.¹⁷ It was a moment characterized by, as Brian O'Connor has put it, 'a radical departure from what we take to be our normal experience'¹⁸ – not on a personal level, but as a momentary tremor of the structural frame which usually provides subjects with an approach to the world and themselves – with this frame being utterly shaken and exceeded by this shock. The shock

14 Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *Adorno/Benjamin. Briefwechsel 1928-1940* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1994), 168; 'Entzauberung der Kunst'.

15 Adorno's critical theory has been often criticized as intellectual elitism which did not have much to do with the actual realities of ordinary people and his naming of mass culture as 'low culture' was often seen as an expression of his intellectual hubris. This letter to Benjamin however shows that 'high and low' did not have a hierarchical meaning but were figures, as Osborne stressed, which marked extreme types of cultural production. Peter Osborne, 'Torn Halves and Great Divides: The Dialectics of a Cultural Dichotomy', *News From Nowhere* 7 (Winter 1989): 49–63.

16 Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 130; Adorno and Benjamin, *Adorno/Benjamin. Briefwechsel 1928-1940*, 171.

17 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Continuum, 2004), 204; Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010), 233.

18 Brian O'Connor, *Adorno* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 170.

experience of artworks or films was then something akin to a traumatic moment in which a subjectivity that is produced through existing structures and identities is temporarily negated or exceeded by an experience that goes beyond our ability to consciously make sense of it. But for Adorno and Benjamin this excess had a productive force. While throwing subjects out of their mental and social structures, by exceeding what could be bound and processed through established subjectivities and social relations, these extreme forms of cultural production allowed people to momentarily engage with the world, others and themselves in ways that were inherent to current social conditions but could not be put into practice. This shock provoked people to enact temporarily some sort of new 'self' or new 'subjectivity' for which there was no structure yet – allowing them to step out, temporarily, of contemporary unfreedom and towards some kind of alternative reality or possible world.

On the other hand, Adorno argued, cultural forms that were allocated in the middle between these extremes, such as jazz, were in an un-dialectical relation to the status quo, which means that they did not combine their reified reality with traces of freedom but were solely contributing to a further reproduction of the status quo. The semblance of improvisation, spontaneity and immediacy, which many art critics at that time saw as characterizing jazz, was according to Adorno simply a mask that would cover the rigidity of existing power relations. Individuality and particularity in jazz were pre-programmed; spontaneity was predictable. Jazz pretended to be free of the commodifying structures and precisely because of its progressive semblance contributed to their reproduction to an even greater extent.¹⁹

Although Adorno had highlighted in his letter to Benjamin on the 18th of March 1936, the critical potentiality of dependent *and* autonomous art against cultural forms that were situated in 'the middle' of cultural production, he would later increasingly turn to the potentiality of autonomous art only. As if haunted by Benjamin's rejection of the autonomous work but also influenced by historical developments Benjamin had not experienced (such as a knowledge of the destructive extent of fascist movements or of the extent to which new art forms were used by the expanding culture industries) Adorno invested many years of his philosophical work into the theorization of the dialectics inherent in the autonomous artwork. His agreement with Benjamin on the critical potentialities of dependent art seemed to have turned into a disagreement which, due to Benjamin's premature death, had never been argued out between these two intellectuals.

19 Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Jazz', trans. Jamie Owen Daniel, *Discourse* 12, no. 1 (Fall-Winter 1989): 45–69.

When Benjamin wrote a letter to his friend, after having read Adorno's jazz essay and two months after having received Adorno's comments on his own artwork essay, he mentioned the jazz essay only briefly. Perhaps there had been no time, no energy, or no intention for a more detailed and critical discussion such as provided by Adorno on Benjamin's essay. Benjamin simply stressed, without mentioning Adorno's remarks on autonomous art, 'the profound concordance' between their ways of seeing things. 'In general,' Benjamin wrote, 'it seems to me that our investigations, like two spotlights trained upon the same object from opposite directions, have served to reveal the outline and character of contemporary art in a more thoroughly original and much more significant manner than anything hitherto attempted.'²⁰

Subjectivity, knowledge, and the capitalist structure

At the centre of Adorno's social theory is a critique of a rationalist epistemology, a specific form of knowledge production or of knowing the world which Adorno saw as characteristic of life in Western capitalist societies.²¹ Adorno and Horkheimer famously argued²² that rationality as understood and practiced by humans in modern societies has become dependent on the repression of anything mythic, unknowable, unnameable, or non-rational. Although, due to its disenchanting and truth-oriented capacities, it was an advancement in comparison to pre-modern mythological thinking, the intellectual emancipation and 'progress' that the enlightenment had promised could not be realized. Instead, by having to constantly distance itself from its mythological, pre-modern

20 Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, 144 Translation changed. I translated 'Scheinwerfer' into 'spotlights' instead of 'headlamps'.

21 Adorno is one of the crucial thinkers that have paved the way for the contemporary project of critical theories, dismantling the hardened structures of modern rationalist thought. But Adorno's thought has been received 'in a much more uneven way' than the work of other 'star theorist' of that time, like for example Heidegger, whose influence on post-modern thinkers such as Derrida or Lyotard can be traced easier. While the most obvious continuation of Adorno's work in the theories of the 2nd generation of the Frankfurt School (Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Albrecht Wellmer) turns out to be, like Simon Jarvis claims, not the most significant one, the question of the meaning of Adorno's work for contemporary thought has infiltrated various other intellectual currents. Some have dragged Adorno into the field of deconstructive and post-structuralist thought, using him to point at the undecidability of metaphysical and philosophical problems (e.g. Christoph Menke, Martin Jay, Wolfgang Iser or Rainer Naegele). Others, on the other hand, are inspecting his contemporary meaning for understanding certain philosophical traditions, reading Adorno as Hegelian (Jay Bernstein), as a thinker of German Romanticism (Andrew Bowie), as (Hegelian) Marxist philosopher (Peter Osborne, John Roberts) or have started investigating his link to phenomenological questions and in particular his link to the work of Heidegger (for example Hermann Moerchen, Ute Guzzoni, or Alexander Duettmann). Simon Jarvis, *Theodor Adorno: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory* (Routledge, 2006), 3–12. My aim here is not to reduce the multiple ways in which his theory can be unpacked nor to advocate one of these genealogies in contrast to others. Instead, I attempt to use the opacity and unevenness of Adorno's intellectual legacy in a productive way. Remaining close to Adorno's text my aim here is to retrieve the tension between art and the societal status quo that has been crucial to Adorno in order to allow for a trans-disciplinary and transgressive exploration of art's relation to thought in the context of contemporary art. The dialogue I construe is one between Adorno's dialectical, artistic text and the theory and practice of contemporary art.

22 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso Books, 1997).

past and from anything that could not be known or comprehended through a rational approach, modern rationality and thinking had turned into myth itself. Rationalist epistemology does not allow for a dynamic form of thought that would be directed towards an unknown and unposited object or otherness but enacts instead a nature-controlling and deductive form of knowing the 'out there'. While nature and god had mastered the subject in pre-modern times, now the supposedly enlightened and 'autonomous subject' of modernity was mastering anything that could potentially question its fragile freedom – constructing the world in a way that suited its preconfigured and hegemonic concepts or fantasies. A critical exploration of how thought and reality interrelate based on some form of immediate experience, was blocked by the dominant epistemological relation to the world.

The fact that modern life and our relation to reality are characterized and shaped by this rationalist epistemology is according to Adorno not a coincidence but the expression of a capitalist mode of production that structures all areas of social life according to its own laws. Capitalism subjugates individuals, their social relations, and thoughts to the mechanizing, fragmenting, and reifying laws of a profit-oriented market, and it is these material conditions, created by although not reduced to specific modes of production, that have led to a situation in which human beings are increasingly detached and estranged from their environment, their own selves, and others. The main reasons for this estranged form of social life are the fetishizing effects of a market which turns unlike objects or actions into exchangeable commodities.²³ Not the use value but the exchange value of commodities, something that is not part of the thing itself and that escapes our immediate experience, determines their status as recognized and valued objects. The same is the case in regard to labour and social relations that are shaped by class structures and the respective competition under which single subjects enter the market. Not the quality of particular actions, products, or encounters determines their value, but more whether they can create profit – which, in turn, is again determined by processes that are withdrawn from the experiential realm of particular actions or encounters.

This abstract and fetishized character of social relations, rooted in the way society is organized, thought, and lived, creates on an epistemological and experiential/phenomenological level a particular type of subjectivity. Immediate experience is inhibited, the subject therefore separated from what it perceives as other, with no means to bridge this separation other than by using and holding on to the concepts or fantasies it has learned through ideological structures. This reified

23 Marx's commodity fetishism.

subjectivity is according to Adorno a ‘constitutive subjectivity’²⁴ - which means that it is a subject position which is not the result of individual impulses expressed in language, but a learned, ideological pattern of thought that is applied and reproduced, regardless of whether it does justice to what it seeks to express or not.

Subjects in capitalist societies have therefore reduced means to explore and reflect upon the relation between concepts and objects of their thought. What in this regard has gone missing or what has been repressed in the course of modern enlightenment is, Adorno argues, a mimetic relation to the world, which would allow us to engage with reality by approaching and imitating it as an unposited other. He suggests that humans had not always been as strongly caught up within conceptual and rationalist structures as they seem to be in modern societies, or better, that there are other ways of using our conceptual means to know and engage with the world and ‘the other’ than the ones predominantly used in modern, enlightened societies. In this respect, Adorno argues that mimesis, as in contrast to rationalist forms of knowing, creates a knowledge of the object by imitating and in some way incorporating it through experience. In mimetic and reciprocal explorations of the object ‘one (a subject) is affected and somehow changed by confrontation with some aspect of objective reality (an object)’²⁵; which means that in mimetic encounters both subjectivity and objectivity are constituted in relation to each other. I become a subject when I allow, to use Veena Das’s words, ‘the knowledge of the other to mark me.’²⁶ However, since this reciprocal form of mimetic experience as a form of epistemological engagement with the world is drastically reduced in capitalist societies, the subject is forced to colonize and constitute the object based on existing, pre-formed categories.

Thought therefore turns into an end in itself – it simply wants to see confirmed what it already knows. The estranged subject uses objects as ‘a mirror in which to reread itself, mistaking its own image for concretion’²⁷ while the other cannot be respected or explored in its strangeness but has to be processed and controlled by what is already familiar to us. Rationalist epistemology deadens the subject. The suffering of others, their vulnerability and uniqueness, escapes its categorical perception and since anything painful or ambiguous threatens the coherence of our conceptual engagement with the world, it has to be repressed.

24 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 2007) p.xx; Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik. Jargon Der Eigentlichkeit*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 10.

25 Brian O’Connor, *Adorno’s Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality* (The MIT Press, 2005), 2.

26 Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2007), 17.

27 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 13; Adorno, *Negative Dialektik. Jargon Der Eigentlichkeit.*, 25.

It is then not that the Kantian subject, as many postmodern theorists have argued, does not exist. The problem is rather, if we follow Adorno's argument, that it does, and that under current societal conditions it has become an inhibited, alienated, and lonely subject – an isolated and atomized monad, which cannot comprehend the concept of community other than as a concatenation of independent individuals. An ethical relation to and recognition of the object is under current material conditions not or almost not possible.²⁸ And according to Adorno, it is this particular form of constitutive subjectivity and the constrained relation between subjects and their others, and not the lack of material means or technologies, neither the unavoidable and unchangeable violent nature of human kind, that is responsible for the continuation of suffering and injustice in contemporary societies.²⁹

Other ways of knowing

Despite his radical rejection of rationalist epistemology, Adorno does not oppose epistemological and mediated treatments of experience and reality in general; nor does he oppose modernity or modern ideals per se. Instead, Adorno is committed to explore the possibilities of an alternative, negative epistemology which he calls 'negative dialectics'. In contrast to dominant forms of knowing this epistemology is not determined by its knowledge or conceptual possession of the object but is instead actualized in a radical critique of existing knowledge and discourse; its aim is not an identical, positive form of knowing, which would be expressed in a posited reconciliation of object and concept, but rather a continuous 'self-reflection of the spirit'³⁰ – a form of reasoning which aims at revealing the non-identity between concept and object in order to make us sensible to what escapes our conscious thought. We start knowing the object, the other or our own otherness if we become able to rigidly criticize, again and again, knowledge we already possess.

In this regard, art takes on in Adorno's social theory a crucial role because it opens up the possibility of an encounter with non-identical and 'irrational' aspects of reality that are inaccessible to reified thought under current societal conditions. Art is in fact, Adorno writes, 'a refuge for mimetic comportment.'³¹ It preserves a mimetic, non-identical form of experience which in other spheres of today's capitalist society is drastically reduced, if not non-existent. As such a mimetic

28 O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectic*, 12.

29 'Adorno is committed to the Hegelian-Marxist view that the prevailing forms of rationality within any given society determine the self-limitations of that society. The significance of this view for the philosophy of experience lies in Adorno's contention that contemporary Western societies are shaped by a form of rationality that actually prevents the articulation of the idea of experience which Adorno believes is possible and exclusively compatible with a nonideological rationality.' *Ibid.*, 8.

30 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 204.

31 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 69; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 86.

comportment, art, he argues further, ‘completes knowledge with what is excluded from knowledge and thereby once again impairs its character as knowledge, its univocity (Eindeutigkeit - unambiguousness).’³² This means that art ‘knows’ reality in a way that the unambiguity of our rational knowledge is shattered. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno writes:

(S)omething in reality, something back of the veil spun by the interplay of institutions and false needs, objectively demands art, and (...) it demands an art that speaks for what the veil hides. Though discursive knowledge is adequate to reality, and even to its irrationalities, which originate in its laws of motion, something in reality rebuffs rational knowledge. Suffering remains foreign to knowledge; though knowledge can subordinate it conceptually and provide means for its amelioration, knowledge can scarcely express it through its own means of experience without itself becoming irrational. Suffering conceptualized remains mute and inconsequential, as is obvious in post-Hitler Germany.³³

Although we can cognitively know the most drastic and incomprehensible aspects of our life through conceptual thought, know the irrationality and destructiveness enacted in the Holocaust, we cannot know them in a way that they would force us to take action – to take on responsibility for the destruction caused which profoundly challenged any positive self-image or know the degree of unrepairable suffering which explodes any ordered conception of reparation. Reified knowledge which has made possible an industrialized mass destruction of humans impedes the latter’s full comprehension. Art, on the other hand, allows us, if not forces us, to engage, at least momentarily, with aspects of our life that are in excess or ‘back of the veil’ of what can be grasped conceptually.

The crucial feature of art that allows artworks this specific non-reified relation to reality is according to Adorno art’s autonomy. Not artworks that try to educate and enlighten their audience about the reified conditions in capitalist societies,³⁴ nor those that intend to, for instance, directly commemorate the Holocaust, but precisely those artworks which seek to withdraw from any practical, social realm or usage are the ones that bring us in touch with the non-identical aspects of our life from which we have been estranged. The more an artwork seeks to free itself from any societal use the stronger it engages with a societal truth which is not accessible to discursive thought. The aim of each autonomous artwork is then, according to Adorno’s modern art theory, the controlled development of formal, non-rational, aesthetic laws. As such the artwork entails ‘rules which do not apply to any other natural object or human product.’³⁵ It purely concentrates on

32 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 70; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 87.

33 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 24; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 35.

34 For example Brecht’s oeuvre.

35 Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester: University Press, 2013), 2.

finding out how sounds, visual forms, or words could be composed in a way that escapes any practical or ritualized use or meaning, while at the same time acquiring a meaning as aesthetic, purposeless artistic objects or units.

However, although autonomous art as a particular form of engaging with truth is a product of modern societies,³⁶ its ideals and with them the place of modern, free art have become uncertain. The autonomy that art achieved, Adorno writes, ‘after having freed itself from cultic function and its images, was nourished by the idea of humanity. As society became ever less a human one, this autonomy was shattered.’³⁷ In an unfree society, Adorno argues, art cannot be free. Like everything else it is subjected to the reifying laws of the market. But as long as art tries to exist as art, as long as it seeks the autonomous space on which its existence depends, it still carries traces of this freedom which are in a stark tension with the commodifying reality that infiltrates art. In that sense, autonomous artworks turn into something like a battlefield for freedom, each of them striving for something that cannot be realized, but without this battle art would cease to exist altogether. In its struggle for survival art thus moves ever further towards its autonomous, non-discursive, and eventually abstract sphere in order to become able to express what it experiences mimetically in its own way. And by doing so these aesthetic, abstract forms are being turned into entities that absorb something truthful about the struggle it takes to free oneself from homogenized, administered, and ritualized forms of knowing and possessing the world.

Each artwork is thus broken or paradoxical³⁸ - social, dependent and autonomous at the same time. It is not free but at the same time it exists only as art because it seeks to express truth in its own aesthetic way. Beckett’s novels, for example, are not as abstract or alienated from real life as they seem. Instead, they are an aesthetic and free, non-reified expression of the most concrete and reified reality we all, in some way, experience but cannot and don’t want to know. They express the extent to which our lives have been reduced to a solipsist shell, with nowhere to go, nowhere to come from while trying to endure the burden of a meaningless and atomized life serving the market. Art is therefore, Adorno writes, ‘not only social because of its mode of production, in which the dialectic of the forces and relations of production is concentrated,’ i.e. the art market and its modes of production that influence artistic practice, nor, Adorno continues, ‘simply because of the social derivation of its thematic material’, hence its content. ‘Much more importantly, *art becomes social*

36 It is hence, like the new art forms theorized by Benjamin, a product of capitalist conditions which can potentially contribute to the sublation of the latter.

37 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 9.

38 Adorno calls this ambiguous character of art art’s ‘double character’ - art is free and social/socially determined (thus subjugated to capitalist reality) at the same time.

by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art (italics added).³⁹

Both artistic knowledge of the anguish characterizing today's society as well as an artistic anticipation of or striving for a potential freedom, are actualized in art at the same time.

Consequently, artworks are recurring demonstrations of the permanent collapse of modernist ideals (due to their socially determined existence) while at the same time being sites of their negative preservation (due to their self-referential, autonomous potential).

The broken or paradox character of an autonomous artwork in capitalist societies as described above is however not something that reduces art's critical potentiality. According to Adorno the opposite is the case. Art in a capitalist and unfree world has to be broken and ambivalent if it wants to be directed towards truth – and thus if it wants to be art. Artworks that, for some reason, become autonomous in an un-dialectical way, which settle in their appointed niche and reconcile themselves to an unreconciled and troubled reality by simply reproducing means of aesthetic expression that have already been accepted and appropriated by the market and its reified subjectivities, lose their ability to break with the laws of commodification. They turn instead into purely dependent commodities. Similarly to what Adorno saw happening in the case of jazz, these 'established' autonomous artworks might then produce new forms of cultural expression, but the individualizing and particular elements characterizing these cultural objects serve in these cases merely a further repression of the rigidity of existing power structures. Their artistic and individual semblance turns into pure entertainment and distraction from a system that in fact prioritizes majorities and profits over the fragility and individuality of the particular. So only artworks that acquire their autonomy in an aporetic struggle for freedom from extra-aesthetic elements of the social sphere and which develop aesthetic laws through this 'antinomy of autonomy and social fact'⁴⁰ engage also with the antinomy characterizing modern societies – and thus with historical truth.

Art's linguistic quality

Autonomous artworks are further characterized by a linguistic quality – or a resemblance to language ('Sprachähnlichkeit'). They seek to know the object by mimicking it with the artist arranging sounds, shapes, or words in a way that the artistic composition expresses something about the object's truth that escapes discursive knowledge or any existing or known use value of the object. This mimetic relation does however not coincide with a clear refusal of rational and intellectual ways of exploring/knowing the material world. Rather, Adorno writes, '(t)he survival of

39 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 296; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 335.

40 Osborne, 'Torn Halves and Great Divides: The Dialectics of a Cultural Dichotomy', 57.

mimesis, the nonconceptual affinity of the subjectively produced with its unposited other, defines art as a form of knowledge and to that extent as “rational.” For that to which the mimetic comportment responds is the telos of knowledge, which art simultaneously blocks with its own categories.⁴¹ Art is thus not separated from rationality. Its purpose is not a weakening of a rational and spiritually/intellectually mediated relation to the world in general. Art is rather to be understood as a specific form of rationality, or better, as an engagement with the aesthetic material/object that strives towards an ethical comprehension or knowledge of this object, which art by itself, however, cannot deliver.⁴² Or to put it differently, art says something truthful about the society it is being produced in without knowing what it means. It is an expression of objectivity mediated by a subjective, mimetic engagement with an object – an attempt to capture something universal as particularity. And the ‘relative success or failure of individual works in expressing the truth about the society in which they are produced,’ as Peter Osborne writes, ‘will depend upon the precise way in which the irreconcilability of their mimetic and rational moments is expressed through the formal properties of the work’⁴³ - i.e. the aesthetic arrangement of its form.

Approaching an object aesthetically therefore does not mean to approach it in a purely emotional or intuitive way. This would be a position that is often defended from within a positivistic, rationalist register according to which aesthetic and sensual engagements with the world are seen as the opposite of rational and genuinely analytic forms of contemplation, with art being regarded as not suitable for any sort of structured analysis. Neither does it mean that approaching an object aesthetically prioritizes affective engagements with materiality over rational forms of knowing. This, in turn, is a position often found in post-modern discourses on art, in which art is theorized as covering subjective, singular views of the world that cannot be objectified (see below). Nor does it mean that an aesthetic exploration of objectivity is a similar yet inferior version of a truly spiritual control of the object (which would be the Hegelian position). Art, according to Adorno and contrary to all these more or less established positions, completes knowledge by what conscious knowledge lacks. Art is in a dialectical relation or tension with reason and its effect or force is enacted in the way the formal properties of an artwork express the contradiction between what we can know rationally and what exceeds this knowledge.

41 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 70; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 86–87.

42 ‘In aesthetic experience,’ O’Connor writes, ‘the object is the end of the experience, where in socially effective rationality – instrumental rationality – the object is the means, and it is used in order to allow the agent to achieve some end that is different to the object.’ O’Connor, *Adorno*, 171.

43 Peter Osborne, ‘Adorno and the Metaphysics of Modernism’, in *Theodor Adorno: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, ed. Simon Jarvis (Routledge, 2006), 33.

Consequently, we cannot know truth without the aesthetic and subjective means of art. ‘Unveiled is truth to discursive knowledge,’ Adorno writes, ‘but discursive knowledge does not have it; the knowledge that art is, has truth, but as something incommensurable with art.’⁴⁴ What art has is an objectivity which is mediated by or which emerges from a specific, subjective feeling or engagement with the object. This feeling as an *aesthetic* feeling is however not an expression of purely individual, psychological impulses projected onto artistic material, but a composed product of an experienced encounter with an unposited object or truth (mimesis) – thus with the non-identical or non-colonized aspects or potentialities of the material explored in art.⁴⁵ Or to put it differently, feelings become aesthetic and directed towards knowledge and reflection when, expressed in an artwork, they say (art’s resemblance to language) something that goes beyond the subject’s (artist’s and spectator’s) psyche. For it is the ‘linguistic quality’ of the artwork, Adorno writes, which ‘is its veritable subject, not the individual who makes it or the one who receives it.’⁴⁶ Artworks then speak for themselves and they start doing so the less they say what the artist could have said or the audience could have known already.

The subjectivity produced by an artwork (the artwork as subject) is furthermore non-identical with existing subject positions. It is a latent subjectivity without a real, empirical subject (not an expression of the artist’s genius – sublation of his/her own unconscious desires or struggles) but constituted and realized ‘through the action of the work’s language.’⁴⁷ The autonomous artwork is therefore better understood as another subject than as a material object.⁴⁸ As such the artwork’s subjectivity is a product of a ‘division of labour’ in which important although minimal parts are contributed by the artist, while other parts are constituted by the object to which the artist entrusts his/her own subjectivity by imitating or absorbing it. Adorno writes:

By entrusting itself (the individual) fully to its material, production results in something universal born out of the utmost individuation. The force with which the private I is externalized in the work is the I’s collective essence; it constitutes the linguistic quality of works. The labor in the artwork becomes social by way of the individual, though the individual need not be conscious of society; perhaps this is all the more true the less the individual is conscious of society.⁴⁹

44 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 167; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 191, trans. amended.

45 ‘The strongest buttress of subjective aesthetics, the concept of aesthetic feeling, derives from objectivity, not the reverse.’ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 216; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 246.

46 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 219; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 249.

47 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 220; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 250.

48 Juliane Rebentisch, ‘Autonomie? Autonomie! Ästhetische Erfahrung Heute’, in *Ästhetische Erfahrung. Gegenstände, Konzepte, Geschichtlichkeit*, ed. Sonderforschungsbereich 626 (Berlin, 2006), 2, http://www.sfb626.de/veroeffentlichungen/online/aesth_erfahrung/.

49 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 220; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 250.

Autonomous artworks embrace a truth about contemporary societal conditions or contemporary ‘collective experience’⁵⁰ about which they ‘speak’ through the subject created in the artwork, without however society or collective experience being a conscious element or content of the artwork or the artist’s work done to the material. What speaks through an artwork is not an ‘I’ but a ‘We’ or, as Adorno calls it paradoxically as well, a ‘collective subject’. This collective subject is unmediated, confrontational, and unreconciled, not positively translatable into classes or social groups, but it is nevertheless synthesized and existent in the artwork’s speech. This ‘aesthetic We’, a utopian actualization of a different form of collectivity, formed around a different subject-object relation (mimetic engagement with the object), is present and absent in art at the same time. ‘Although art is tempted to anticipate a nonexistent social whole, its non-existent subject,’ Adorno writes, ‘and is thereby more than ideology, it bears at the same time the mark of this subject’s non-existence.’⁵¹ Like the artwork itself so also the utopian subject that speaks through it is broken and ambiguous – on the one hand reconciliation with something other than today’s atomized subjects or subjugated masses; on the other hand a witness of its own impossibility.⁵² But art can sustain this ambiguous tension between knowing and not knowing, or between hope and despair, because it speaks its own, non-discursive language.

Finally, this ‘voice’ of an other, ‘non-rationalized human behavior’⁵³ speaks to us in enigmatic ways. ‘All artworks – and all art altogether – are enigmas; ... That artworks say something and in the same breath conceal it expresses this enigmaticalness (Rätselcharakter) from the perspective of language.’⁵⁴ Art’s enigmatic character therefore reinstates in us a sensitivity or receptiveness to strangeness or otherness (Fremde) which in reified society has gone to waste. But while the enigmatic character of art shatters existing knowledge at the same time it also refuses to simply replace it with new, alternative knowledge. Its enigmatic character – its riddle – is not something that is there to be solved and fully comprehended – its strangeness not to be conquered. Consequently, there is also not such a thing as an analogous interpretation of an artwork – something once and for all known and revealed. Whenever an artwork seems to have been understood or appropriately analyzed, an enigmatic remainder escapes, haunting the victorious sound of any interpretation – or as Adorno has put it, ‘the enigmaticalness outlives *the* interpretation that arrives at the answer (italics added).’⁵⁵ Once an artwork can be fully known it stops being art

50 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 221; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 251.

51 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 221; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 251.

52 ‘Paradoxically, art must testify to the unreconciled and at the same time envision its reconciliation; this is a possibility only for its nondiscursive language.’ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 221; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 251.

53 O’Connor, *Adorno*, 154.

54 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 160; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 182.

55 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 165; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 189.

since strangeness in art is never assimilated. Whenever we think we have got it, it withdraws from what is comprehensible to us – but neither does it simply disappear. The artwork requires in a way an answer or interpretation that cannot be given – and yet not trying to give it would mean to repress the alterity that has been experienced through art.

Art is hence not, as Adorno writes, a ‘hermeneutical’ object⁵⁶ that can be comprehended through interpretation. But at the same time art does not escape the realm of comprehension and spiritual reflection either. Instead art, as non-discursive knowledge of the object, has the potentiality to ignite spirit by what is opposite to spirit – or to put it differently, to ignite comprehension by the current incomprehensibility of the truth captured by art. By shattering our existing and conscious means to know and comprehend the world art forces us to think differently and anew. Art absorbs the object in its strangeness and it is this strangeness or otherness that then turns into the spark that starts off spirit or thought. However, it sparks it off in a way that this spirit or thought remains strange to itself – fragile, contradictory, and sometimes painful. It makes us think in ways that do not fit existing thoughts and that can also be hardly sustained in their discursive shape. What we therefore can ‘know’ through art we can only know in a specific form of thought that mimetically clings to what art is and does. A philosophical interpretation of art cannot be a colonization of the artistic but must be rather an imitation of art through the means of thought – not constructing an identity between artwork and concept, but allowing an artwork to unfold its truth which it possesses but cannot comprehend – and which we can attempt to comprehend but never possess. Thought that derives from and mimics art never comes to rest in itself; never settles as if it were total. ‘This is its form (Gestalt) of hope.’⁵⁷

Truth then emerges, flashes up, only ever when artistic and discursive forms of knowing are in a constant, dialectical relation to each other. Each depends on the other and it is their interplay, triggered by the enigmaticalness of art and facilitated by self-reflective, critical thought, that creates a nearness to what appears as strange – that allows strangeness or the real to emerge. Rationalist epistemology, on the other hand, rebuffs such a puzzling dance between artistic and cognitive intellect – it laments the frustrating endlessness of this dialectical movement and finally wants to truly know.

56 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 157; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 179.

57 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 406; Adorno, *Negative Dialektik. Jargon Der Eigentlichkeit.*, 398.

Contemporary art – a departure from Adorno

Adorno's art theory, of which many parts were developed in the 1960s, is a philosophical examination of the critical and epistemological potentialities of *modern* art. This means that Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* examines artistic practices that were strongly oriented around the modernist ideal of art's autonomy. Art was seen as exclusively focused on the development of mainly abstract, aesthetic laws (aestheticism) and a formalist interpretive method that highlighted the form of an artwork as in contrast to its content (formalism). It is furthermore an approach that understands art as structured around specific art genres, in which artistic practice develops according to the genre-specific conventions and genealogies from which each individual artwork seeks to set itself free. Adorno, for example, insisted that the enigmatic nature of art was something that was accessible to those only who understood the language of art, i.e. to those who had the necessary education in aesthetics and who could comprehend or attempt to comprehend the ruptures of genre-specific traditions enacted by the formal properties of individual works aesthetically. Modern art, as theorized in modern art theories, was seen as a realm within societal life which followed its own laws. The aesthetic value of an object was then assessed according to these laws and depending on whether art objects managed to broach these in innovative ways. The subjectivity of the artist, the experience of the spectator as well as the societal context in which the artwork had been produced were according to Adorno and other modern art theorists irrelevant for these universal aesthetic judgements – and thus irrelevant to the autonomous character of art.

All these aspects characterizing the phenomenon of modern art (autonomy, aestheticism, formalism, art genres, and genre-specific developments of artistic forms) were, however, drastically challenged by the emergence of contemporary art and the art-theoretical discourses that resulted from the so-called dissolution of art's boundaries in the past five decades ('Entgrenzung' der Künste).⁵⁸ While modern art was defined and recognized by the autonomous status of the objectified artwork, it was precisely this autonomous status of the art object that contemporary art practice had started to dispute. Contrary to its withdrawn and detached predecessors, contemporary artworks seemed increasingly driven by the desire to step right into the societal sphere, its ordinary forms and its sites of everyday life, that had been excluded from the universalist realm of modernist art.

58 Juliane Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst* (Hamburg: Junius Hamburg, 2014), 25.

Among the various aesthetic, technological, and institutional changes that shape this departure of contemporary art from its modern past,⁵⁹ two paradigmatic shifts stand out. Firstly, contemporary art is distinguished by an increasing devaluation or rejection of the idea of a static and distinct art object (Kunstwerk) that could be seen as something that is clearly separated from the socio-historical context and the audience to which it is going to be presented. While modern artworks were created and perceived as finalized objects which had been thoroughly composed by an artist and then presented to an audience that would engage with them but not add anything to the artwork's composition, today's art presents itself in performances, events, or installations which often remain to a high degree open and unfinished when presented to their audience.

This openness does not only mean, as Umberto Eco has argued in *The Open Work*, that artworks allow for an indefinite plurality of interpretations.⁶⁰ It also means that contemporary artworks are characterized by a concrete incompleteness (are quite literally 'unfinished'⁶¹) which makes an artwork emerge only in the interaction or in collaboration with its audience. Open works require that the spectator, auditor, or reader imposes some kind of 'judgement on the form of the piece'⁶² and only through this involvement or contribution does the artwork exist or emerge – with every such interaction or contribution anew. This new notion of 'the open' work as unfinished without the performative involvement of the audience in the 'finalization' of the artwork does not only mean a different conception of the aesthetic experience involved but also, as Eco stresses, 'different visions of the world that lie in these different aesthetic experiences.'⁶³ In that sense, art is less to be understood as the state or composition of an object, but rather as something in motion – artworks are 'works in movement', as Eco writes, 'because they characteristically consist of unplanned or physically incomplete structural units.'⁶⁴

Furthermore, openness towards and nearness to the audience of contemporary art is also realized in an openness to the material of social life. Particularly site-specific or public artworks create encounters with a spontaneously created audience by engaging directly with familiar and known

59 See e.g. Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson, eds., *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

60 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 4. 'A work of art, therefore, is a complete and closed form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity. Hence, every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself.'

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., 1.

63 Ibid., 7.

64 Ibid., 12.

spaces, public or private, of people's everyday life. In that sense, contemporary artworks do not any longer restrict themselves to purely aesthetic explorations of sounds or visual forms, something that according to modernist art theorists characterized their autonomy, but are strongly interlinked and engaged with objects and phenomena from everyday life. Fragments of the non-artistic and known/familiar social context become the material of artworks themselves. Not only mundane everyday objects, real bodies, social relations, the artist's subjectivity, or even such uncontrollable factors as the weather turn then into elements which contribute to the creation of the art event,⁶⁵ but contemporary art is also characterized by a more direct engagement with political issues, such as 'the global reach of exploitation, deep histories and memories of oppression, the prevalence of gender inequality, geopolitics, and the "war on terror"'⁶⁶ - or more recently the refugee crisis (see for instance the 2016 Venice Biennale) or the rise of right-wing populism (see the LD50 gallery in Hackney, London). Adorno's claim then, that an artwork was closer to societal truth the less it engaged with society seems to have been turned on its head by the open practices of contemporary art since today's art defines itself precisely by its close and intense engagement with society and its societal fabric.

The second aspect characterizing contemporary art in contrast to its modern predecessor is a gradual dissolution of the borders between artistic genres and consequently between art and non-art more generally. Many contemporary artists no longer stick to genre-specific strategies and techniques, but move constantly across various forms of artistic expression, creating multi-media projects whose forms are driven more by the subject matter than by the formalist conventions of one specific aesthetic field. While modern artworks were still assessed according to the formalist laws defining their specific genre, contemporary artworks strongly withdraw from formalist judgements and appear in such diverse ways that they do not allow for the recognition of traditional art historical trends or interpretive patterns through which they could be approached and therefore identified or valued as art. The autonomy of art which, according to Adorno, had become uncertain in a society that was generally characterized by a lack of freedom, seems now to have vanished completely. Many contemporary artworks are so strongly intertwined with forms and contents from the non-artistic world, so intensely dependent on their spectator's contribution or knowledge, that they seem to have given up on any sort of overarching element that would turn and justify them as art in contrast to other forms of social life (legitimation crisis of contemporary art).⁶⁷

65 Like for example in Philippe Parreno's installation in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall *Anywhen* (2016/2017).

66 Julian Stallabrass, 'Elite Art in an Age of Populism', in *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, ed. Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 39.

67 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London; New York: Verso, 2013), 7.

These developments have been strongly criticized from the perspective of modernist approaches with some contemporary theorists rejecting the phenomenon of contemporary art as a reification and instrumentalization of art altogether. Postmodern art theorists, on the other hand, have taken these shifts in contemporary art practice as an occasion for a more fundamental critique of modern art theories. The phenomenon of contemporary art was a proof of the inadequacy of a universalist and normative modern art discourse. According to postmodern theorists like Jean-Francois Lyotard or Jean Baudrillard, artworks should be understood as singular objects that would generally resist any form of theorization. Each artwork in itself is a playful, eclectic, ironic, and democratic form of expression. Each artwork is different and none is following one, universal goal. Consequently, no artwork is accessible through a single system, philosophical approach, or meta-language. Art does not seek truth, but ‘seeks to testify an event to which no truth can be assigned, that cannot be made the object of a conceptual representation.’⁶⁸ Contemporary artistic practice and the singularity of its works is therefore to be understood as something which contributes to the diffusion of the present, of it becoming broader⁶⁹ or more diverse, rather than as a coherent and autonomous phenomenon that could be approached through objectified conventions or laws. The nominalism and anti-traditionalism of modern art theories had become, in the view of postmodern theorists, anachronistic since its concepts, specifically its concept of autonomy, failed to account for the plurality and transgressive character of what defines art practice today.

Autonomy understood differently – return to Adorno

Contrary to the discourses that see modernist art theory as disqualified by contemporary art practice, or alternatively contemporary art practice as disqualified by modernist art theory, there have been recent attempts to understand the phenomenon of today’s art through the categories and paradigms set up in modernist frameworks – including those of Adorno.⁷⁰ The crucial question that requires exploration, if key elements of Adorno’s art theory shall remain meaningful within the realm of contemporary art practice, is, however, whether the involvement of the spectator as well as the involvement of the artist’s subjectivity and that of other non-aesthetic elements, such as fragments from the public sphere, automatically result in art’s un-dialectical commitment to commodifying structures and their reified subjectivities – which means whether the boundary-

68 Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), 55.

69 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, ‘Die Gegenwart Wird Immer Breiter’, *Cicero Online*, accessed 15 September 2014, <http://www.cicero.de/salon/die-gegenwart-wird-immer-breiter/43336>.

70 John Roberts, ‘After Adorno: Art, Autonomy, and Critique’, *Historical Materialism* 7, no. 1 (1 January 2000): 221–39.

crossing tendencies of contemporary art turn it inevitably into a cultural form that is set at what Adorno called ‘the middle’ of the cultural sphere in capitalist societies. Or, to put it in other words, can the autonomy of art, its promise of freedom, which according to Adorno was crucial for art’s specific access to truth and its potentiality to ignite different forms of knowing, be maintained even if the artwork opens towards the non-artistic sphere to such an extent that it dissolves as objectifiable, distinguishable, and decisively composed, aesthetic totality?

Two argumentative shifts allow, I argue, for the necessary adjustments to Adorno’s aesthetic modernism: firstly, the openness of the work does not automatically cancel the artwork’s specific linguistic quality. It rather, as I will argue, increases its mimetic capacity. And secondly, the autonomous character of art is not to be found in the individualized, aesthetic objects it creates, but in the aesthetic experience and the specific subject-object relation that is initiated by all art – whether we look at the art events created by modernist works in the first half of the twentieth century or those triggered by the ‘open’ and ‘unfinished’ works of contemporary artists. It is thereby this aesthetic experience, as a specific relational process between object and subject, a process initiated by the art event and its participating audience, and furthermore a process that in today’s society is exclusive to art, which characterizes art’s autonomy and bears the potential for different and new thought.

Let me explore the first point. Although contemporary artworks are characterized by their open and unfinished form which strongly depends on inputs from the audience and the non-artistic sphere, this openness does not automatically imply a rejection of any sort of structural or linguistic quality of art. It does not mean that what is created as art is reduced to singular events and hence not generalizable. Even open works do not necessarily withdraw from the sphere of knowledge. The reason for this is that although the open object remains unpredictable due to the strong involvement of the audience or public site in regard to its final shapes or performances, it is still a constellation of structural and often material units whose shapes and outcomes are to a strong extent the result of a composition created by the artist.⁷¹ ‘We can say that the “work in movement”’, to quote Eco again, ‘is the possibility of numerous different personal interventions, but it is not an amorphous invitation to indiscriminate participation. This invitation offers the performer the opportunity for an *oriented insertion* into something which always remains the world intended by the author.’⁷²

71 See also: Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London ; New York: Verso Books, 2012).

72 Eco, *The Open Work*, 19. Eco further writes: ‘The author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee a work to be completed. He does not know the exact fashion in which his work will be concluded, but he is aware that once completed the work in question will still be his own. It will not be a different work, and, at the end of the

So although the contemporary artwork is not hermetically sealed, but to a significant extent only created through the unpredictable interventions by the non-artistic sphere, it still contains a core artistic structure which orients or molds these interventions in specific ways. In addition, this core of 'open works' is less to be understood as the personal intention of an author or artist, but rather as the product of a mimetic encounter in which the object, theme, or idea, expressed in the structural units of the artistic composition, has gained some kind of subjectivity itself. What Eco called the world intended by the author is thus neither an expression of the artist's subjectivity nor simply a result of the interventions of the non-artistic sphere, like the participating audience, but an object or structured reality speaking in its own terms; that is, an objectivity mimetically expressed. This composition or structure is then responsible for orientating, mediated through the art event, our input as participants, as well as for transforming a public site or for translating non-artistic phenomena into specific forms or artistic situations. Contemporary artworks are hence not as 'democratic' or 'open' as they seem – not as free from any structure as some would like them to be. But if we cling to Adorno's belief in the critical potentiality of aesthetically composed objects, it is precisely these composed or artistically symbolical elements of these contemporary works which preserve the artwork's orientation towards some kind of truth – or which preserve art's potentiality to mimetically know and explore truth.

The crucial difference compared to modern artworks is, however, that this linguistic quality of the contemporary artwork remains incomplete or insignificant without the audience's intervention – i.e. the spectator's, the reader's, or the public's involvement. This means that the openness of an artwork becomes in a way a structural unit itself, one which is in tension with the remaining units controlled by the artist. What the artistic subjectivity mediated by the composed structure of the artwork then has to say cannot be said without the particular and unpredictable interventions by the non-artistic other, who is eventually the one who allows the artwork to become art – or to speak as art. We could therefore say, that the openness of an artwork captures the contingent and relational character of its material which would escape its artistic knowledge if it did not become part of the art event itself. That means that if the conscious composition of mimetic impulses enacted in art is directed towards, as Adorno argued, a utopian or ideal form of rationality, then the rationality actualized in contemporary artworks is something that is profoundly incomplete and unfinished. It

interpretative dialogue, a form which is his form will have been organized, even though it may have been assembled by an outside party in a particular way that he could not have foreseen. The author is the one who proposed a number of possibilities which had already been rationally organized, oriented, and endowed with specifications for proper development.'

is better understood as an endless movement between the universal and particular, the symbol and the real, than as a fantasy of an eventual reconciliation of concept and singularity in identity.

Secondly, what then defines these open works is, as Juliane Rebentisch has argued, a specific form of 'aesthetic experience' which in turn is characterized by a distinct subject/object relation. The specific aspect of this relation created by contemporary open artworks is its processual and reciprocal character by which both the subject (audience) that is engaged in the artwork, and the object or constellation that initiates the engagement of the subject, are *changed*.⁷³ The object of an open artwork, although artistically organized and oriented, depends on the unpredictability of the participating audience or the unpredictability of the non-artistic site. Only when performed, used, or enacted by a non-artistic other can it develop its symbolic potentiality. For although structured in units it would remain a mere thing or a mere (unused) idea without the participatory and site-specific elements which form part of its open composition. The subject-object relation characterizing the contemporary art event thus provides the object with a mysterious double-character, which was already characteristic for modern art objects. It makes the object float between being a mere thing, public site, or coincidental, arbitrary constellation, on the one hand, and a symbolic, artistically meaningful work, on the other.⁷⁴

Furthermore, the subject who, as spectator, gets engaged with the artwork also passes through an ambiguous transition. On the one hand, it is interpolated as an acting and knowing subject which engages with a familiar material, environment, or theme. On the other hand, however, it experiences a profound moment of 'manifest bewilderment' since the object towards which it has been drawn and in whose creation it has participated remains to a significant extent indeterminable,

73 Rebentisch, 'Autonomie? Autonomie! Ästhetische Erfahrung Heute'.

74 Michael Fried's minimalist ideals of the 'non-relation, uniform and holistic' object are another good example, in which particularity and singularity are not opposed to the objectivity of the object, but are rather created by it, as Rebentisch wrote, in an uncanny way. Ibid. According to Fried the most simple and homogenous forms of minimal artworks acquired, uncannily, subjective traits, without demonstrating these positively through their aesthetic form. Subjective traits of minimalist works therefore emerged as aspects of an experienced meaning triggered by the aesthetic minimalist object that was seemingly meaningless. Particularity was then not to be seen as an addition to the universal but as something inherent to the holistic, uniform work, which appeared simple and plain and yet was experienced as something more. Seeing a universal form we see something more without being able to grasp what this something more might be. The most simple and meaningless objects are thus marked by a tension – on the one hand mere form or thing, on the other hand, a site of meaning which they acquire as art. Or as Adorno wrote in regards to the absurd novel (Beckett), it 'expresses the absence of meaning and thus through determinate negation maintains the category of meaning.' (AT 205/235) The negative arousal of meaning is then also an arousal of a subjective or particular existence, which from an objectivist point of view does not exist and could not be explained or justified, and yet is there. Minimalist and absurd works are therefore able to express senselessness and absolute determination or uniformity while at the same time evoking flashes of an uncontrolled and not understandable singularity at the same time. Their critical power lies in the tension between these extremes. A tension that, as we have seen Adorno argued, can only be maintain by the non-discursive language of artworks.

unknowable, and thus uncanny. From the perspective of the subject this means that aesthetic experience is akin to what Kristeva understood as abject experience.⁷⁵ Art produces an abjection of the self through which a moment of ‘self’ is established in the experience of alienation. An aesthetic experience is an encounter with the horror of ambiguity or the knowledge of non-identity that triggers, as Kristeva calls it, ‘a narcissistic crisis’; an experience in which “subject” and “object” push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again – inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: that is, the abject.’⁷⁶

The experience of participation or the degree to which the audience is included as knowing and active subject in the formation of an art event is never sufficiently participatory or is never understandable enough to allow the subject to perceive itself as the person or collective in charge – and in contrast to modern artworks this puzzlement of existing knowledge and existing self-images happens in relation to sites, encounters, and themes we think we are or should be most familiar with.

The aesthetic experience created by contemporary art is hence characterized by an ambiguity of openness and distance or a simultaneity of ‘activity and passivity,’⁷⁷ a process that happens between object and subject in the encounters created by art. Aesthetic subjectivity is not any longer something that is situated within the art object as a reflection of the mimetic encounter with the unposited elements of a specific artistic medium, but is created as reflexive opening of a hierarchical subject-object relation in the art event itself. The subject experiences a loss of control over its performative and epistemological involvement while the object takes on a mysterious double-character: on the one hand, a mundane, known, and accessible constellation, performance, or public site, on the other hand, a symbol with a meaning which nevertheless remains inaccessible to our existing cognitive means.

It is this experienced ‘priority of the object’ – a priority which emerges in the subject’s struggle to comprehend the object while being confronted with its own cognitive limitations – that turns the art event into a concrete manifestation of a different non-reified and thus utopian reality. What art, including contemporary art, enacts is nothing less than a different, non-discursive engagement with the world, the other and our own otherness. An engagement which troubles our existing knowledge

75 Lauren Redhead, ‘The Beautiful and the Political’, *Contemporary Music Review* 34, no. 2–3 (28 October 2015): 247–55.

76 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Columbia University Press, 1984), 18.

77 Rebentisch, ‘Autonomie? Autonomie! Ästhetische Erfahrung Heute’, 5.

while exposing us to aspects of the world which we otherwise repress or which are inaccessible to us since there exists no conceptual or societal structure to make sense of them under contemporary capitalist conditions. And it is this specific relation, which does not allow the participating subject to command or possess the object as it would be the case in the hierarchical subject-object relation created by today's form of rationalist knowledge, that defines art's autonomous character – and this despite contemporary art's strong engagement with the societal sphere.⁷⁸ The option of being simply consumed or dominated by the subject is excluded from art. Autonomy? Autonomy! - as goes the title of Rebentisch's essay.

In the spotlight – art today

In the 1930s Benjamin explored the way in which new art forms had created artistic objects that were characterized by their closeness to and engagement with social life. The disenchanting character of new art forms had produced an audience which participated in and contributed to the reality expressed in these reproducible and assembled cultural mass products; hence an audience or spectatorship that was radically different from the small audience for traditional artworks whose aura was keeping its non-artistic other at an unbridgeable distance. Adorno, on the other hand, insisted on the importance of the autonomy and withdrawnness of art if it wanted to preserve its progressive, truth-oriented potentiality. Only when abstaining from engaging with the societal sphere and the realities of its spectatorship could art resist the reifying mechanisms that were increasingly characterizing advanced capitalist societies.

In this sense, today's boundary crossing, engaged, and yet autonomous contemporary art is, I argue, an expression of this dialectical tension characterizing cultural production and its new art forms, and this tension specific to 'new art' has in some way already been explored by these two modern philosophers eighty years ago, with each of them casting a different spotlight on the historical ontology of art and its 'political' potentiality within capitalist societies. Contemporary art then expresses the dialectical relation of art to the status quo in a particular, new way. It triggers in us an experience of shock – an abjection of the self. It shatters everyday routines that make us reproduce and maintain a structure and image of ourselves that prevent us from exploring alternative worlds or the world differently. And it does this not despite its strong engagement with the non-artistic sphere, but precisely because of its closeness and dependency on the existing societal realm, our habitual ways of thinking and knowing ourselves and others.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 4.

These transgressive artworks fearlessly engage with the social fabric. They approach it like a surgeon, exploring and assembling this fabric from within, disrupting or cutting through its ritualized processes, without knowing the outcome and yet changing their constellation. At the same time, however, contemporary art creates constellations in which the reality presented to us, a reality in which we have been complicit as a participating or knowing spectatorship, escapes our means of comprehension and control. It creates encounters that liberate the object in its non-identical, unknown reality, allowing its materiality to overwhelm us and our knowledge of it, as well as bewilder existing subjectivities. It creates the puzzlement from which we have to start learning to know ourselves and others anew, instead of constantly avoiding any confrontation with the non-identical and unconscious aspects of collective reality. Today's contemporary artworks thus *speak* – or they potentially do – and although they often seem to speak the same language as used by other social spheres something in them, or potentially in some of them, remains different and enigmatic – escaping cognitive forms of comprehension and leaving us with an experience of otherness which requires to be explored in its own way.⁷⁹

When reading contemporary art through Adorno's theorization of the dialectics of modern art and therefore in tension with Benjamin's early leap towards 'dependent' or 'low' art, which I think had influenced Adorno's determined focus on art's autonomy way beyond their letter exchange, then we encounter an art practice which is much more than a sensual (singular) contemplation of reality, and it is also different from a directly political, thus non-artistic, engagement with the world. Instead, we have to say, contemporary artworks know things we don't allow us to know – or we are not able to know. They speak from non-identical worlds – unconscious worlds haunting from the past and with them worlds that still could become – worlds from which we have been increasingly estranged in a society that structurally represses anything non-rational, unknowable, ambiguous, or abject. And in this regard there is one more aspect that deserves, I argue, to be rescued from Adorno's modernist art theory, namely his view of the dialectical relation between art and knowledge or art and theory.

What we perceive from our subject position as puzzlement or bewilderment is in fact an artistic expression of a truth that the artwork has and existing discourse lacks. But without discursive thought artistic subjectivity remains reduced to its own incommensurable knowledge. Art should

⁷⁹ I am referring here to the potentiality of contemporary art as understood through the argument developed in this chapter – not to all contemporary artworks per se.

therefore be seen in relation to thought – a thought or philosophical reflection that allows the artwork to unfold its promise of truth. Such thought, however, has to engage with the artwork in the same way as art engages with reality. Instead of colonizing a meaning in the art object it mimicks and imitates art by using the means accessible to discursive thought or thinking in an artistic way about what art tells us in its non-discursive language.

In regard to contemporary artworks this also means that such ‘artistic’ thought, which allows contemporary artworks to unfold their truth content, will have to be as open and as engaged with the societal, non-artistic fabric as these artworks themselves. Mimicking contemporary artworks with the means and strategies accessible to intellectual or conceptual comprehension then means to establish a form of philosophical reflection which has the courage to approach the material the artwork enacts artistically as closely and as transdisciplinary as the numerous ways in which contemporary artworks cling to the various spheres of social reality. Artistic philosophical reflection has to be as transgressive and as engaged with existing subjectivities, particular sites and the public sphere, its political and epistemological reality, as the artworks through which it explores their status quo – its unknown potentialities and its repressed knowns. For maybe today the withdrawn artwork as Adorno had once theorized it has, similar to what Adorno once wrote in regard to Benjamin’s montage in films,⁸⁰ lost its capacity of triggering an experience of shock. It has not only reached the limits of its autonomous and withdrawn status (see Chapter Four and my discussion of the avant-garde) but has also become too predictable when being out of touch with the world. Today, we could maybe say, the more open an artwork remains towards the societal sphere and its unpredictable, singular elements, the closer our disturbed thinking gets to what is withdrawn from existing knowledge.

80 ‘The principle of montage was conceived as an act against a surreptitiously achieved organic unity; it was meant to shock. Once this shock is neutralized, the assemblage once more becomes merely indifferent material; the technique no longer suffices to trigger communication between the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic, and its interest dwindles to a cultural-historical curiosity.’ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 204; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 233.

PART II

The threshold

Chapter Two

The post-communist condition as threshold experience

In this chapter I suggest conceptualizing the post-communist condition as a threshold experience. By threshold experience I mean a psychosocial reality that is characterized by the gradual disintegration of a communist structure and its simultaneous replacement by a neoliberal frame in former communist countries in Eastern Europe. Understood as threshold experience, post-communism then describes, as I will argue, a specific phase of a fragmented, fragile, and discontinuous temporality preceding and overlapping with the strengthening of a new hegemonic order in Eastern European countries – a contracted ‘space-time’ which, as I will suggest, may open up history to unprocessed ghosts which haunt the Eastern European subject in unexpected ways. At the same time, however, it defines a reality which troubles the Western and national subject, too, since an encounter with this specific threshold state turns into a reminder of the instability of modern identities as well as the instability of beliefs in the continuous chronology of modern progress more generally. I start the chapter by discussing how the notion of post-communism has been used by political scientists, philosophers, and historians so far, in order to then explore how we could understand it as an interim and liminal threshold with a critical and disruptive potentiality.



Figure 1. An illustration of the sudden, experienced loss of the Soviet world after 1989. Illustration by IRWIN, in *East Art Map* (2006), p. 17.

A hopeful beginning

In 2006 philosopher and historian Susan Buck-Morss wrote that ‘the spread of Western scientific and cultural hegemony was the intellectual reality of the first five hundred years of globalization, lasting from the beginning of European colonial expansion to the end of the Soviet modernising project (1492-1992). *It will not remain hegemonic in the 21st century.* (italics added)’⁸¹ The breakdown of the Soviet world marked, according to Buck-Morss, a historical shift that had influenced the world globally. It did not mean an end to the universalist projects of modernity but it required as well as allowed for a total rethinking of its central concepts and strategies which so far had been developed under the intellectual and scientific leadership of Western discourses only. ‘Not that Westerners cannot do critical theory’, she writes, ‘but that in the next phase of theory, all of us will need to recognise and learn from hitherto unacknowledged traditions of cultural experience.’⁸² Buck-Morss understands these necessary paradigmatic shifts as an opening up of dominant modern discourses towards traditions and debates belonging to those geopolitical sites that have been excluded from or colonized by Western cultural spheres, such as ‘Peru, Iran, Serbia, Tanzania, Senegal, Ukraine, Turkey, Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, Tunisia, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Korea, Thailand, Uruguay, etc., etc., etc.’⁸³ Critical theory, if it wants to seize the moment of the ‘post-Soviet condition’, has to become broader. Not simply by adding new ideas to unchanged old ones, Buck-Morss explains, but by establishing a global culture of translating universal ideas from one discursive context into another in order to understand what binds people together; not by looking at what we should all have in common but by a critical exploration of existing differences. Critical

81 Susan Buck-Morss, ‘The Post-Soviet Condition’, in *East Art Map. Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, ed. Irwin Group (London: Afterall, 2006), 495.

82 *Ibid.*, 497.

83 *Ibid.*

theory thus cannot any longer be something that is passed on from one context to another. It should rather emerge in a global dialogue in which new ideas are sparked off from the gaps or limitations of existing thoughts, which arise when ideas from one context are attempted to be understood through or translated into the discursive structure of another. Critical theory as the reciprocal and continuous work of translation would then ‘change *both* contexts’ instead of demanding one to follow the intellectual leadership of another.⁸⁴

According to Buck-Morss the post-Soviet condition is the historical moment in which such a global, critical dialogue could be established for it is a *universal* moment which is characterized by a new global togetherness of a temporal kind. ‘(W)e are all post-Soviet ... We, the ‘we’ who have nothing more – nor less – in common than sharing this time.’ ‘There is no part of global space’, she continues, ‘that is “advanced” in time; none that is “backward”; we are all in this time that is both transient and universal; we share the same contingent history.’⁸⁵ The post-Soviet condition is thus also a historical opportunity from which a ‘Global Left’ could emerge. However, if this moment is understood as an *opportunity* through which global humanity could change in a progressive way – i.e. as a moment in which for the first time ever a truly global and universal humanity could be realized beyond the geopolitical power structures under the leadership of a Christian, white, male West – it then also means that this opportunity could be missed.

The notion of post-communism: its global and regional meaning

In most accounts in contemporary political, historical, and social science the phase after 1989 or 1992, as the time after the ‘fall of European communism’,⁸⁶ is usually referred to as a post-communist or post-socialist condition, with these notions being deployed in order to either describe the new global status quo after the breakdown of Soviet-type communism or to specify and explore the socio-historical transitions in former communist countries more specifically.⁸⁷ Post-communism or post-socialism have thus both a global, universal meaning as well as a regional, geopolitically specific meaning.⁸⁸

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid., 498.

86 Richard Sakwa, *Postcommunism* (Buckingham England ; Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), 2.

87 The term post-communism is also used more broadly to refer to all 33 communist countries in Euroasia including China, North Korea, Vietnam, etc. Since this study focuses on the post-communist transitory phase in Eastern European countries, I will apply the term exclusively to refer to former Soviet Socialist Republics.

88 Sakwa, *Postcommunism*, 1.

Fukuyama's description of this post-communist shift as the 'end of history' is probably the most famous account of this new, global constellation.⁸⁹ Fukuyama interpreted the breakdown of the Soviet world as a victory of one teleological system against others and prophesied a single teleological temporality which would see a further expansion of liberalism and its model of democracy towards the rest of the world. The breakdown of the communist East had shown that there was no progress beyond the progress already provided by Western democracies, and the (neo)liberal, global economy promoted by them. Although not necessarily understood as a universal reality, and by no means a replacement for metaphysics or theology, democracy as thought and practiced in the West had still proven to be the only workable system of hope that could be defended as a working and progressive societal model worldwide. In this liberal and pragmatic view, the war of ideologies between the modern meta-narratives of capitalism vs. communism, between the West and the East,⁹⁰ was seen as having ended, however, with a clear victory of one of the two ideologies involved over the other.

From a pluralist perspective, on the other hand, the notion of post-communism refers to the epistemological and political realities and potentialities that characterize a new, post-ideological era. The socio-political shifts after 1989 were seen as a confirmation that meta-terms or meta-ideas such as communism *and* capitalism, classes *and* class war, which had derived from universalist, modernist teleologies, had lost their political meaning and relevance all together. Post-communism was therefore not seen as the victory of one ideological and material system, but as a general collapse of a Western framework, including its communist branches, which had structured the world and its multiple realities according to its own ideas and strategies. In the new post-ideological and post-foundational epoch the world could not be understood any longer solely through universal ideas that apply to the whole world, nor could progress be understood as one system competing with its potential alternative. Instead, the world we live in today consists of various, simultaneously existing worlds whose main commonality is in each case the historical and contingent particularity/singularity of the socio-historical site. Naming and imagining the future as one common reality and/or imagining it as communist while critiquing the contemporary global situation as capitalist and as mainly structured by economically determined class distinctions had started to be seen as part of a Eurocentric worldview. It meant a continuation of the stigmatization and colonization of 'other' realities through preformed Western categories and analytical tools that

89 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Penguin Books, 2012).

90 Susan Buck-Morss argues that communism, as it had been established in the Soviet Union and its satellite states, had been in fact part of the same Western hegemony as the capitalist economies in the traditional West. The position taken on in this project is, as I will explain below, that it was the same, but different. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (MIT Press, 2002).

were insensitive to the cultural and historical environment of specific socio-historical sites. The crucial paradigmatic shift after 1989 that was promoted and advanced from a pluralist perspective, was thus one that would turn away from universalist models and towards the particularities of local, singular sites.

As Nancy Fraser argued, this post-ideological, and at times also post-political view of the world after 1989, has been accompanied by a skeptical mood or structure of feelings, marked by an increased mistrust in socialist ideas worldwide, and a disbelief in historical, collective possibilities of progressive change. It is a psychosocial state mainly characterized by an 'exhaustion of left-wing utopian energies', including a shift in political demands from a global redistribution of wealth to a demand for the recognition of particular, cultural identities and groups. And this despite the fact, as Fraser argues, that a resurgent economic liberalism is successively increasing social injustice.⁹¹ Post-communism or post-socialism hence mark the end of modern social mass utopias more generally; or the end of the belief in the possibility of a different world which some day will be, if at all, everywhere and for everyone the same – while social injustice, discrimination, and the exploitation of labour and feelings are rising consistently.

In each case, in Western hegemonic as well as in pluralist, postmodern interpretations of the breakdown of the Soviet world, the terms post-communism or post-socialism allude less to an opening of a new, transient, universal time or to the potential creation of a new universal humanity or a global, progressive movement, which would be characterized by its 'ability to see likeness in difference.'⁹² Instead, they function rather as conceptual tools that either describe a new form of control enacted by the victorious West over time and progress globally, or are alternatively used to signify the end of modern universalism and with it the end of the idea of a common time in general. Controlling time by the hegemonic West, or rejecting the idea of a common, global time generally, are in most cases the two realities that are captured, described, and reproduced when using the notion of post-communism in its global meaning.

Similar discursive directions can be observed when the notion of post-communism or post-socialism is deployed in relation to the specific socio-political transitions in former communist countries. The epistemological framework which makes use of the notion of post-communism in its specific, geopolitical meaning is then often one which constructs so-called post-communist

91 Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition* (New York; London: Routledge, 1997).

92 Buck-Morss, 'The Post-Soviet Condition', 498.

countries as developing societies that are assessed from the perspective of a victorious, hegemonic West only. As 'losers' of the ideological war against Western democracy and Western methods of political and economic organization, 'post-communist countries' are seen as going through a transition from a communist structure towards a neoliberal system, which will eventually turn these countries into societies that structurally resemble their Western others. Their contemporary state is seen, theorized, and treated as a transition period from an unwanted or malfunctioning system towards a wanted, liberal democratic state, integrated into a global market⁹³ - with the parameters and direction of the historical moment being clear.⁹⁴ It marks a transition in which the history of those specific countries is being 'corrected' - a transition in which the communist digressions are being reverted and the countries of the former East ideally reintegrated into the dominant Western idea of the history of civilization. Or as Michael Mandelbaum, an American scholar of International Relations has put it, "'postcommunism" hence refers to both the past and future',⁹⁵ and yet neither the past nor the future are unknown parameters.⁹⁶ The only unknown variable is the question how best to realize the transition from a communist state towards a democratic, neo-liberal one. In these cases post-communism does not so much refer to the specific historical ontology of a site and its specific cultural experience, but to methodological concerns formulated from the perspective of those who see themselves as victors of an ideological war.

This means that in today's hegemonic discourses the notions of post-communism and post-socialism, when referring to the specific historical state of countries that once belonged to the Soviet world, are often used as analytical tools, which, as Hana Cervinkova has argued, 'got developed by western scholars to analyze the former societies of the Communist bloc.' This 'hegemonic epistemology of postsocialism' makes it a very different concept from the concept of 'postcolonialism', which 'was born as a project of indigenous epistemological critique against the persistence of colonialism in the postcolonial present.' The use of the concept of post-socialism thus raises questions, Cervinkova argues, 'concerning its usefulness as an intellectually *empowering* (italics added) tool for scholars in challenging local inequities arising from the effects of global

93 The transition that post-communism in this context usually refers to processes of 'economic transformation', 'democratic transition', 'state reconstitution', creation of civil society, buerocreatization, national reconfiguration, international reorientation.

94 And such Western hegemonic perspective is not only taken on and reproduced by debates in the actual victorious West (Western Europe and North America), but has to a wide extent also become the hegemonic view in former communist countries too.

95 Michael Mandelbaum, ed., *Post-Communism: Four Perspectives* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1996), 1.

96 Post-communism 'connotes both a clear direction and a fixed destination. It presumes a goal toward which the 27 countries are moving. That goal is, figuratively, the West: they are presumed to have embarked on a journey from totalitarianism to democratic politics and free market economics.' *Ibid.*, 2.

capitalism.⁹⁷ Instead of expressing the particularity of the local sites as they present themselves from a counter-hegemonic and non-Western perspective, which has been the epistemological direction taken by postcolonial discourses, the notion of post-communism is seen as part of the tool-sets that belong to Western discourses or ideology. As such, it stigmatizes the unity of former Soviet-communist countries as different from the rest of the world and therefore rather reproduces the East/West divide instead of contributing to its material and conceptual deconstruction. And although post-communism, like post-colonialism, describes a state of in-betweenness that is characterized by the trauma of un-belonging as well as the re-valorising hybridity and impurity found in the realities of individual and collective lives in former Soviet-communist countries, it does so from the colonizer's perspective, degrading tacitly this state of in-betweenness into something that needs to be corrected in a certain and known/familiar way.

Eastern Europe as the 'close other'

Interlinked with this hegemonic understanding of the post-communist condition in former communist countries is also the emergence, or better re-emergence, of a new (old) geopolitical space, namely that of Eastern Europe. European countries that belonged to the Soviet-communist 'bloc' before 1989 (countries like Poland, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Slovenia, etc.) are now reintegrated (geopolitically) into the European site. As 'Eastern Europe', however, these countries still remain classified as different from their Western European counterparts. So although the Cold War and with it the historically specific distinction between East and West characterizing the political, economic, and military conflicts of that time had officially ended with the revolutions in 1989, the segregation between Eastern and Western Europe seems not to have been suspended by these socio-political transitions. It has been, as can be seen in the drastic increase of publications and research projects on themes and realities related to 'Eastern Europe' after 1989, rather boosted.

This is no surprise, since, if we follow Larry Wolff's argument, 'the East' as well as 'Eastern Europe' were not primarily a result of the Cold War but an ideological creation reaching back to Enlightenment thought of the eighteenth century. Wolff argues that with the emergence of modernity both Western and Eastern Europe were invented together as complementary concepts 'defining each other by opposition and adjacency.'⁹⁸ The invention of the West as a civilized, cultured, free, and democratic society, as it was thought and shaped in the course of the

97 Cervinkova, 'Postcolonialism, Postsocialism and the Anthropology of East-Central Europe', 155.

98 Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1994), 5.

enlightenment as embodying the absolute and universal apex of human capability and potentiality, was from the beginning of its cultural and discursive existence, Wolff argues, accompanied by or paired with a close but distinct and inferior other – namely the shadowy and barbarian East of Europe. By drawing on Said's concept of Orientalism and the Western construction of the Orient as the radical other of Western identity and sociality, Wolff explores in his historical study of Enlightenment thought and life, how in the eighteenth and nineteenth century a mental map of Europe developed. In this map, which has been reinstated unconsciously after the breakdown of the communist East, prosperity, freedom and civilization had become increasingly associated with the new centers of political and cultural power like Paris, London or Amsterdam, while anything East of Prussia, but still closer than the far Asian Orient, became associated with shadowed lands, backwardness, barbarian violence, crudity. These sites were nonetheless still seen as part of Europe. Wolff argues that the new cultured and civilized West needed to see and experience itself as distinct from something barbarian and inferior – which, however, was still within its reach. Eastern Europe was hence created as 'a paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, Europe but not Europe', opposed to the West like the Orient but still part of it, set up to mediate between the Western 'I' and the radical Orient 'other'. In that sense, Wolff writes, 'Eastern Europe was located not at the antipode of civilization, not down in the depths of barbarism, but rather on the developmental scale that measured the distance between civilization and barbarism.'⁹⁹

The return of the geopolitical entity of 'Eastern Europe' after 1989 as Europe, but at the same time not Europe, can thus be seen as a material and cultural re-manifestation of a paradoxical space, discursively constructed and created as a byproduct of the continuing colonial and controlling ambitions of a hegemonic West. And not only does the reemergence of Eastern Europe mean a reproduction of its Western superior subject in comparison to its inferior close other, but it also structures both West and East Europe around, as Piotr Piotrowski has pointed out, the 'orientalizing (paradoxically Christian modern) gaze' which both need in order to set up their identity against their common 'true' and universal (Muslim and Jewish) other.¹⁰⁰ This means that the use of the notion of post-communism, in relation to former communist countries in Europe, is characterized by a range of problems that contribute to a discursive reproduction of racist structures between West vs. Close

99 Ibid., 18; Other studies that have made use of post-colonial theory to explore the notion and reality of Eastern Europe are for example: Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): In this book she writes that the Balkans, similar to what Larry Wolff wrote about Eastern Europe, 'semicolonial and semicivilized' as they were, 'have always evoked the image of a bridge or a crossroads (...) between East/West.' (p. 16/17); Kovacevic, *Narrating Post-Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe's Borderline Civilization*: Kovacevic describes Eastern Europe as a neocolonial terrain which is transformed in order to fit the requirements for liberal capitalism.

100 Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (London: Reaktion, 2012), 29.

East vs. Far East and simultaneously to a restoration of different temporalities which are assessed and fixed from the hegemonic perspective of a liberal Western idea of progress. It is for this reason why various scholars, especially from countries that once belonged to the communist bloc have treated the notion of post-communism with suspicion, and suggested to end the discourse on the post-communist transition.

In his book *Transition Zone: On the End of Post-Communism*, Boris Buden, for example, has argued that as part of this recent 'colonization' of Eastern Europe by the West, the revolutionary 'fall of the wall' scenario after 1989 had been turned into an event which eventually was dominated and developed by the Western gaze, and through that had been taken away from the countries that had initiated the most significant and democratic revolution of the twentieth century within Europe.¹⁰¹ The post-1989 moment hence initiated a process in which the political agency and empowerment, which the people of the former communist countries had previously acquired in their uprisings against the communist regimes, was gradually withdrawn from those who had initially enacted it. Instead of representing an actual political emancipation of the East from a state of political subjugation, the discourse about the post-communist transitions in the East is strongly shaped by a Western rhetoric around the 'transition to democracy' and is marked by an enchanting aura of liberation by or towards the West. Accordingly, what is today described as the post-communist state in the East is a highly undemocratic phenomenon victimizing, infantilizing, and consequently incapacitating the new Central and Eastern European countries, which are stigmatized as inexperienced in democratic matters, unable to put 'civilization' in place, and as suffering from all sorts of 'Kinderkrankheiten (childhood illnesses)' in their early stages of development towards a mature democratic order á la West. The paradox being, as Buden argues, that it was the people and the new social movements in the 'former East', and not the Western countries, which had performed a democratic and political act by having resisted and challenged peacefully the former communist anti-democratic regimes.

The current so-called post-communist 'transition to democracy' and the language commonly used to denote this process represent rather an undemocratic repression of previously existing political potentiality, while transforming it into a Western hegemonic form of democratic social life. And consequently, the use of the notion of the post-communist East, when referring to today's Eastern Europe as a result of Soviet communism, also contributes to a further reproduction of the West/East divide by denying countries that once belonged to the Soviet bloc, as Hlavajova and Sheikh have

101 Buden, *Zone des Übergangs*.

argued, the ‘right to the same present as the west.’¹⁰² The notion of the post-communist or former East thus encloses these countries in a time that is forever behind or delayed when compared to the West, which seems to have once again acquired the global monopole for dictating the development and speed of historical time.¹⁰³

Eastern Europe and nationalism

In addition to these issues connected to the notion of post-communism and Eastern Europe in so-called Western discourses, another problematic aspect of its specific meaning has become more visible in the public sphere in recent years. This case finds expression in the increased positive reference to the notion of Eastern Europe and post-communism by neoconservative nationalist movements in former communist countries, which demand, in a dangerous discursive proximity to pluralist, postmodern and anti-Western positions, that their specific socio-historical conditions be acknowledged and their status freed from the influence of the hegemonic West. Political parties such as *Law and Justice* (PIS) in Poland, or the *Fidesz* party in Hungary, see in the post-communist specificity of Eastern European countries not only a necessity, but also a chance to establish a different, non-Western and strictly anti-communist form of democracy. Representatives of these parties criticize and oppose liberal progressive interpretations of the post-communist transitions in Eastern Europe which, as they argue, construct Eastern European countries as an incomplete version of the hegemonic West – namely as ‘lacking’ or ‘in need’ of institutions or structures that are supposed to be in place from a Western point of view. The formation and reinforcement of particular Eastern European *national*, or even nationalist identities, which is reinforced by the colonial and invasive attitude of Western democratic states towards the returning Eastern European countries, is then achieved by an ultra conservative and protective return to traditionalist ideals including a return to their Christian roots.

In regards to collective processes of commemoration, which play an important part of the formation of these Eastern national identities, these anti-Western movements are characterized by obsessive reminders of historical national traumata and constant evocations of the threat of a potential colonial invasion by one of the big two Others – either by a communist Russia from the East or a fascist

102 Hlavajova and Sheikh, *Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989*, 23.

103 Hence why the Former West project, conceptualized and coordinated by Hlavajova and Sheikh, focuses instead on supporting processes and discourses that former the West. By doing so, however, they lose sight, I argue, of how the post-communist experience of being undone, which is to a much greater extent present in Eastern European countries, can be a source for bringing forward the undoing of the West as we know it. Looking away from the undoing of the East supports the West’s rehabilitation – not the other way around.

Germany from the West.¹⁰⁴ In contrast to the liberal progressive view, these neoconservative movements further aim, as Andraz Lanczi, a close friend and advisor of Hungary's current prime minister Viktor Orban has put it, to establish an 'internalist view' that analyzes the specific conditions of former communist states in order to structure the re-nationalization and re-'democratization' of these countries.¹⁰⁵ The emphasis here is on the reinstatement of 'traditional' values and identities while simultaneously considering the specific conditions that were left after forty years of communist rule. Strict de-Communization or lustration¹⁰⁶ as well as a re-privatization of public property based on 'moral' and 'traditional' as in contrast to economic considerations are forms in which neoconservative parties try to distinguish their understanding of post-communist politics from their liberal, pro-Western counterparts.¹⁰⁷ As could be observed in Poland and Hungary in recent years, however, such understandings of a democratic post-communist state entail generally a successive reduction of democratic rights accompanied by a restoration of a fundamentally nationalist and traditionalist moral framework. Although their journey is not directed towards becoming a modern Western democracy, these movements are fueled by nostalgic fantasies of a truly Christian, non-secular nation – and in unity with other Eastern European countries of a truly Christian 'other Europe'.¹⁰⁸

Post-communism or post-socialism are thus hugely problematic terms, both in their global as well as in their regional meaning. The discourses in which these notions have been predominantly used in recent years show how the West managed to expand its hegemonic position after the end of Soviet-type communism; they show how today's global developments remain essentially structured by Western ideas, concepts, and strategies, as well as how former communist countries are in the process of being reintegrated into a temporality as it is predominantly practiced in North America and Western Europe as countries that lag behind. We have also seen that using these notions contributes to a further expansion of a Western 'intellectual oligarchy'¹⁰⁹ worldwide including the former communist East where Western thought constructs and relations, whether in their (neo)liberal or their (neo)conservative, nationalist version, are being reimplemented. Talking of the

104 Ewa Stanczyk, 'Caught between Germany and Russia: Memory and National Identity in Poland's Right-Wing Media Post-2004', *The Slavonic and East European Review* 91, no. 2 (April 2013): 289–316.

105 Andras Lanczi, 'What Is Postcommunism?', *Society and Economy* 29, no. 1 (2007).

106 Legal persecution of former Communist party members.

107 For a discussion of these developments in relation to the case of Poland more specifically see: Ewa Stanczyk, "'Long Live Poland!': Representing the Past in Polish Comic Books', *The Modern Language Review* 109, no. 1 (January 2014): 178–98.

108 This 'anti-Western' and ultra-conservative unity of Eastern European countries found expression for instance during the refugee crisis in 2015 when all Eastern European countries (CZ, PL, HU, SLO) that are part of the European Union refused to take on refugees from Syria (the majority of whom are Muslim).

109 Buck-Morss, 'The Post-Soviet Condition', 497.

post-communist condition therefore closes down, it seems, the transient universal moment of one common, global time, which according to Buck-Morss had opened up after the breakdown of the Soviet world; it closes down the opportunity to ‘former’, undo or change the West and with it today’s global society. And finally, it seems that by using the notion of post-communism we fail to step out of a conceptual and societal framework which for more than 500 years has been dominated by the West (New York, London, Paris, Berlin and Moscow), and which so far has impeded a truly universal movement despite presenting itself as the only creator or author of universal values worldwide.

But avoiding or repressing this notion in order to signify a paradigmatic shift away from Western hegemonic structures won’t do either. In fact, as I will argue below, it is precisely the notion of post-communist Eastern Europe in its specific, regional meaning which bears the conceptual potential to explore the post-1989 moment and the new global status quo in a critical, progressive way, since it opens up or confronts, as Buck-Morss demanded, today’s hegemonic discourses with so far ‘unacknowledged cultural experiences’. For if we do not want to miss out on the opportunity of transgressing a Western modern framework as it has been put into practice in its colonial and repressive way, we not only have to open up existing discourses towards unacknowledged cultural discourses and traditions from the ‘outside’ of a Western frame but we Westerners have to become open towards otherness from within. The post-communist condition understood as an experience which is specific, although not exclusive to former communist countries is, I argue, precisely such a liminal experience which challenges the Western ego and its temporality in which it occupies the leading role from within its own conceptual and historical framework. Post-communist Eastern Europe understood as a transient threshold forces us Westerners, the Westerners in the East and the West, to think about Europe’s past, present, and future differently. Conceptualizing the post-communist condition as threshold experience can therefore allow us, I argue, to rescue aspects of this liminal experience and with this keep the transient moment of a changed global world and a changed, self-critical Western position in it open.

The ‘other’ Eastern Europe as temporary threshold

Post-communism as a threshold experience refers to a specific historical experience (not a specific cultural identity) that was created by the felt and actual disintegration of one societal logic (communist) and its gradual replacement by another (national, capitalist). More precisely, in the case of former communist countries in Eastern Europe post-communism as threshold experience

also means a confrontation with the disintegration of one failed modern utopian project, communism, and the gradual disillusionment of hopes that had been directed towards its structural and ideological replacement (neo-liberalism). What I therefore want, is to explore the post-communist moment as a threshold experience which is characterized not by the clarity of a past one wants, or has to move away from, or the exact shape of a future one is pushed towards, but as an experience of crisis which is precisely characterized by the loss of such a knowledge of historical direction and purpose. Dwelling within this transitory state or interregnum of collective confusion instead of constructing it as a clearly defined bridge from one state to another, will allow us, I argue, to stumble over unexpected realities and ‘unacknowledged cultural experiences’ which may tell us about the dreams and catastrophes of the post-communist moment in new, contemporary and critical ways.

In his essay 'The Grey Zone of Europe' Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski described the category of post-communist Eastern or Central Europe as belonging to a transitory geopolitical space. It describes a space that exists in a state of flux only and that results from the opposing socio-historical forces of the breakdown of the communist regimes in the East, on the one hand, and the simultaneous ‘colonization’ of the former East by the West, on the other. In Piotrowski's account ‘Eastern Europe’ is hence a transient site which started to dissolve in the moment it was created – a site ‘which already does not belong to the East but is not part of the West “yet”’¹¹⁰ - and, most importantly, which was not intended to exist or acquire an identity in the first place. What Piotrowski tries to describe is not the ‘Eastern Europe’ as the ‘primitive other’ belonging to the geopolitical map of a Western view of Europe, characterized by its fixed role or relation to its advanced 'brother', and neither is it the (Western) East of the Cold War as a place of communist otherness closed up behind the Iron Curtain. Instead, Eastern Europe marks the specific post-communist moment as an undefined or unintended movement or passage emerging from those regions that in some way ‘return from the future.’¹¹¹ As such the notion of post-communist Eastern Europe refers to an unplanned threshold that has not been ascribed a meaningful existence in itself but functions as a transitory sphere ‘between two different times, between two different spatial shapes’¹¹² – when the past communist order is gradually replaced by a new hegemonic register.

110 Piotr Piotrowski, ‘Grey Zone of Europe’, in *Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe*, ed. Phoebe Adler and Duncan McCorquodale (London: Black Dog, 2010), 200.

111 See Boris Groys, Anne von der Heiden, and Peter Weibel, eds., *Zurück aus der Zukunft: Osteuropäische Kulturen im Zeitalter des Postkommunismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2005).

112 Piotrowski, ‘Grey Zone of Europe’, 200.



Figure 2. A recently refurbished communist residential block in Gdańsk with a mural saying 'The future was here!'. Photo by author.

In contrast to approaches which see in the post-communist specificity of Eastern Europe a basis for a distinct identity or a distinct discursive site, or which alternatively use it to describe an anticipated and controllable transition towards a corrected identity (away from its communist diversion), post-communist Eastern Europe as a grey zone focuses on the temporary interregnum itself.¹¹³ It describes a state in limbo in which identities and structures are reoriented and changed, triggering a profound crisis of known temporalities, discourses, value systems, and ritualized behaviors. Post-communist Eastern Europe thus refers to a psychosocial state of certain countries in which past experiences, world views, laws, and forms of knowledge but also certain objects, public sites and urban features are losing their previous applicability – with their status as fixed entities of collective consciousness, as routines and repetitions, fading or being destroyed. At the same time, however, a new or other structure with its own dynamics, its own identical roles, discourses, and legal practices, as well as its own ways of structuring and designing public sites, objects, and services has not yet been acquired or established sufficiently enough, in order to compose coherent and foreseeable (whether neoliberal or neoconservative nationalist) flows of thoughts, actions, and feelings. And although the post-communist condition describes a moment, which has triggered such profound shifts in discourses and routines globally, it is in former communist countries, I argue, that this transient threshold is experienced in a condensed, intensified, and more dramatic way. For if, as Gramsci has put it, a ‘crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born,’¹¹⁴ an image that has been often used to describe the current crisis of global capitalism,¹¹⁵ then

113 ‘It is a kind of interregnum in the process of societal formation, in which a fissure opens and the society remains stuck literally above this abyss.’ Buden, *Zone des Übergangs*, 81 (my translation).

114 Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, eds., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 276.

115 See for example Zygmunt Bauman, ‘Times of Interregnum’, in *Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989*, ed. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh (Utrecht; Cambridge, MA and London: BAK; MIT Press, 2016), 203–11; or

the post-communist threshold is a crisis in which not only the 'dying' origin and the not yet existing destination are blurred, but also the unidirectional temporal logic of our sense of moving from an old, non-functioning to a new, functioning state is profoundly disturbed. It is not simply that the old is dying and the new cannot be born, but that what is dying (communism) was believed to potentially be the new that would supersede what is now in the process of coming back (capitalism). The post-communist condition as threshold experience is thus an experience of time and space which is characterized not only by a lack of a historical telos, a telos or structure that still has to be designed or born, but also by a total loss of historical direction, triggering an experienced implosion of existing Western temporalities and identities more generally.

Walter Benjamin's messianic time and the post-communist rupture

In *On the Concept of History*, Walter Benjamin famously attempted to conceptualize a different notion of historical time, one which articulates history not as a chronology of progress and as shaped by the linear succession of particular events (empty, homogenous time) but as an anachronistic, messianic time. History as messianic time, in the footsteps of Benjamin, emerges as contracted experience when the coordinates that form the present moment and that link it to a specific historicist narrative of a known past and future, suddenly shift their constellation. It is in these experienced shifts or dislocations that history takes place, allowing for the return of what has been forgotten or repressed in common ideas of known history. Messianic time therefore does not refer to accounts of history that are directed towards alternative goals, ideals, or spaces in the future; nor is it an expansion of one dominant historicist narrative by alternative, 'other' accounts narrated from the perspective of minority positions (pluralism). It is to be understood as an immanent rupture, a crack, in existing perceptions of history that determine and structure the present moment. History emerges as messianic time in the experienced tension that is created when a common teleological sense of historical continuity is suddenly confronted with its anachronistic, discontinuous other, instantiating a fleeting experience or confrontation with the 'tension between the nondirectionality of time and the unidirectionality of history.'¹¹⁶ A 'Jetzt-zeit' as an opening up of a spatial and temporal 'Zwischenraum'/in-between space that does not follow a line of images of the past and future, but forms a strictly a-teleological rupture that repeatedly withdraws history from the successive continuation of known events. As such the experience of messianic time is

the various contributions to the Historical Materialism Conference, 2015, London, which used Gramsci's idea of crisis as its overarching theme.

116 Peter D. Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011), 4.

characterized by its inaccessibility not because it speaks to us from another future, but because it shores up what is unknown, nondirectional or in contradiction with the present logic of a unidirectional understanding of time. Historical time according to Benjamin can therefore be understood, as Sami Khatib has put it, as ‘a modern experience of “transcendental homelessness” (which) coalesces in the messianic in a non-logocentric figure of loss, privation and displacement (Entstellung).’¹¹⁷

My aim here is not simply to construct the post-communist condition as an example of a messianic rupture but to suggest that the post-communist condition as threshold experience refers to a stretch of time or a specific socio-historical reality or state whose psychosocial texture and temporality is akin and hence also potentially correspondent to sudden resolutions or reductions of what is usually perceived as the common flow of history. If we manage to dwell in this unintended grey zone, in this specific temporal and spatial ‘Zwischenraum’/in-between space that is characterized by intensified privation and displacement, then we might discern images, encounters or spaces in which any preformed, coherent and dogmatic narration of history implodes, opening the present moment to images of unexpected constellations between past and present catastrophes – and hopes. And this also means that it is from within this transient in-between space that we may become able to constitute our present ‘in relation to new versions of the past’¹¹⁸ - not by relating to the past in temporal or continuous ways, since it is precisely this continuity that is being shattered by the return of former communist countries to a capitalist structure, but in images in which the ‘what-has-been’ relates to the ‘now’ in sudden and unexpected constellations.¹¹⁹ In these flash-like irruptions of history unknown or repressed aspects of the past may return. Histories that could not be told may be redeemed in order to ‘unstuck the present from its seemingly necessary future.’¹²⁰ Relating to the past in new ways or through previously untold stories means then to constitute a present from which a future, as a stepping out of the ever same, is made possible. The experiences characterizing Eastern Europe as a transient grey zone, I argue, are a potential source for such new and transformative versions of past events and their hitherto unknown or unthought relation to the present moment.

117 Sami R. Khatib, ‘A Non-Nullified Nothingness: Walter Benjamin and the Messianic’, *Stasis. Journal in Social and Political Theory*, no. 1 (2013): 85.

118 Andrew Benjamin, ed., *Walter Benjamin and History* (London; New York: Continuum, 2005), 213.

119 According to Benjamin the past and present relate to each other in dialectical images – capturing their dialectic tension, which says something about our present that we usually don’t see, in a standstill.

120 Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin and History*, 214.

One of the crucial processes that defined the immediate years after the transfer of power from the communist party to a democratically elected successor in former communist countries was the rewriting of official historical accounts.¹²¹ Communist accounts of history had to be replaced by official, national narratives that were in line with the new socio-political frame after 1989. History had to be told anew – or better, it had to be corrected. In Poland, for instance, this return to national historical narratives, which also meant a return to pre-communist narratives from before its transition into a communist state after World War Two, appeared in the form of two distinct discourses. One discourse was that of history writing as ‘Big History’, put forward by conservative nationalist circles, while the other was advanced by liberal conservative and pro-Western circles.¹²² In the former perspective, history appears mostly as a combination of two ‘classical’ Polish themes that go hand in hand with the faultlines of nationalist ideology: ‘martyrdom and victimhood’ and ‘Polish heroism and resistance in the face of foreign oppression.’¹²³ In their combination these ethnicist-racist narratives reproduce a contemporary version of a martyred Poland as a ‘Christ of nations’¹²⁴ that has repeatedly suffered under the evilness of others while having managed to maintain its God-given purity. History writing from the perspective of the liberal conservative position, on the other hand, is characterized by attempts to construct a historiographic account through a multi-layered frame that can only be developed in a juxtaposition of different narratives.¹²⁵ Here, the Polish nation is presented less as one undifferentiated unity but as a pluralist cluster for various ethnically specific narratives and experiences which, however, are held together by the overarching category of Polish nationhood.

While these two forms of official history writing belong to different and opposing political currents, they still overlap in their formation of a collective memory based on national categories as well as in their opposition to the internationalist teleology of their communist predecessor and its practices of silencing episodes of personal and national memory. Today’s Poland in its different official versions insists, like other Eastern European countries, through the recomposition of national historiographies, on its right to return to its identity and existence as a sovereign nation state. In this respect, each of these historical narratives aims to restore continuity in the wake of an experience

121 James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2010); Maria Hirszowicz and Elzbieta Neyman, ‘The Social Framing of Non-Memory’, *International Journal of Sociology* 37 (2007).

122 Stanczyk, ‘Caught between Germany and Russia’.

123 Stanczyk, “‘LONG LIVE POLAND!’”, 182.

124 ‘Christ of nations’ is a term that was adopted by Polish Romantics during the time of the three partitions but it is still used today as an image for a national narrative that describes Poland’s self-conception as Europe’s victim of injustice and its role as messianic figure.

125 Adam Michnik, ‘The Trouble with History. Tradition: Imprisonment or Liberation?’, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 22, no. 4 (2009): 22.

that has profoundly disturbed, at least temporarily, the unidirectional flow of time as it is usually imagined along a national, modern register. As a result, in both discourses the communist past is constructed as an ‘accident’, an ‘aberration’, a ‘grand failure’, or as a ‘waste of time’,¹²⁶ hence as an unnatural and un-normal detour of a nation whose aim it must be now to return to the right track of history.

These official historiographies do not so much suggest a new account of history but a return to or a repetition of traditional, national readings that during communist times had to be repressed or concealed; and even if there are various events about which people were not allowed or able to talk openly during communist times and which are now publicly discussed and named, such as the mass murder of Polish nationals by the Soviet secret police in Katyń, or the massacre of Jedwabne where Poles murdered hundreds of their Jewish neighbors, these events are recounted through a structure set up by national categories and narratives that to some extent was complicit in the violence that erupted at that time. In these official narratives the experience of communism and its sudden breakdown has therefore not resulted in a change of historical time or direction – it has not unstuck the present from a deterministic future that is likely to continue as a repetition of the past – but it has made Eastern European countries, certainly within this official, public realm, return to images or conscious narratives of a national past.

In contrast to these official discourses, the post-communist condition is one from which such a return of already existing narratives and subject positions is complicated if not impossible; or as Boris Groys has put it, the heritage of the post-communist site ‘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.’¹²⁷ As a threshold experience, the post-communist condition lacks the directionality and orientation on which national accounts of history depend, and it is the signifier ‘post-communism’ that captures or symbolically preserves aspects of this disturbing encounter with what is commonly experienced as modern time or history. For the term ‘post-communism’ does not only signify that something once present has past, which would be the conventional meaning of ‘post’, but that what has past (communism) was meant to be the successor of what returns (capitalism) – that what has past had already been in some way ‘post’ in relation to what came after. Communism in the past tense, or post-communism thus signifies a paradoxical temporality that breaks with any modern teleological logic, whether in its liberal, capitalist, its national, conservative or in its

126 See for instance: Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Failure: The Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (London; Sydney: Macdonald & Co, 1990).

127 Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, Mass; London: MIT, 2008), 155.

socialist, communist version. With communism or a 'post-capitalist future' in the past tense post-communism as the unintended grey zone on the European continent is the product of 'modern history' going astray. It is a transitory space-time from where relics of the communist experience appear as a fissure or crack in any coherent, existing account of who we are today or could become in future.

Consequently, from such liminal and transitory space-time any desired mirror image or identity that would constitute us as modern subjects is distorted. This is not only for the post-communist Eastern European subject, who to use once again Groys' words, is forced to travel the journey of modern progress backwards as the only way of avoiding an unwanted confrontation with its recent communist aberration,¹²⁸ but also for the Western European subject who is repeatedly reminded by the relics of 'European communism' of an 'other' experience which took place in a time and space that, at least temporarily, seemed beyond the control of the hegemonic West. What then disturbs the Western European subject when confronted with relics of the communist experience is that there is something about the phenomenon of communism that people in Western Europe cannot know about and that therefore, unconsciously, also limits their authority to speak about it. In the East, communism had taken on material shape, leaving in the societal body actual traces, wounds and a series of defense mechanisms which had evolved in reaction to the intrusive and often violent attempts to implement a classless society by communist states. In the West this modern utopian project, the fears and desires attached to it, remained largely an imaginary and increasingly dystopian fantasy of an alternative future. And it is this gap in the experienced and embodied history of Europe that puts the Western European subject in a position from which it would have to listen instead of lecture about the political and social implications of a phenomenon that in the end 'was based on an ideological foundation so revolutionary and so far reaching that almost no one who lived during the twentieth century remained untouched by it.'¹²⁹

Communism in the past tense haunts today's Europe – in the East and in the West. And relics of this other communist world are unavoidably attached to the post-communist Eastern European other, whose return to a Western European historiography is welcomed but accompanied by fragments of an episode that threatens to escape today's mastering Western gaze. This, from the Western perspective, unknown or unexperienced episode of a supposedly different world, of a world that would at the same time be the end of the world as we know it, turns these close but 'other'

128 Ibid., 149–64.

129 Ghodsee, *Lost in Transition: Ethnographies of Everyday Life After Communism*, ix.

European societies dangerously into an unruly space on the continent where people might possess a knowledge of possible pasts or futures that Western Europe and North America lack. Instead of the known and familiar mirror image that the construct of Eastern Europe ought to provide, the Eastern Europe that returns from its communist, Soviet diversion suddenly presents a distorted image that contains uncanny (i.e. familiar yet strange) elements that the Western European subject cannot or does not want to make sense of.¹³⁰ And it is this disharmony or crack triggered by a historical shift, which was supposed to restore harmony and an unambiguous, known temporality in Europe (Europe's reunification after 1989), that eventually challenges today's Western, national order from within. For this other, 'communist' experience and the post-communist threshold in which relics of unknown or repressed past events return is not the product of a distant, outside other, of an alterity that does not belong to or has been excluded from or repressed by modern thought or modern culture, but a product of modern enlightenment itself. Having to close or cover up this uncanny gap caused by the missed (from the perspective of the Western European subject) or aberrated (from the perspective of the Eastern European subject) experience of European communism has therefore become one of the unwanted legacies of the East's temporary diversion towards a different modern direction – and this disturbing gap is felt even stronger the more today's experienced social injustice forces us to find answers to questions we thought had been buried by the past.

130 While I am writing a study commissioned by the German government has revealed that people in East Germany are more susceptible to racist ideas than people in West Germany. People in East Germany tend to elevate their own German or even East German identity over others more strongly than people in West Germany. The reason for this is seen in the ethno-centric world views represented and enacted by the communist government in the GDR. The research approach chosen in this study has been widely criticized for being characterized by a low validity and reliability. What, however, has not been scrutinized is a common discursive pattern that attributes 'negative' or unethical developments to the communist history of these regions while the difficult and often humiliating experiences people in East Germany have made after the breakdown of the GDR are not considered – are actually silenced – in the discussion of such developments. <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2017-05/studie-ostdeutschland-rechtsextremismus-ddr-dresden>

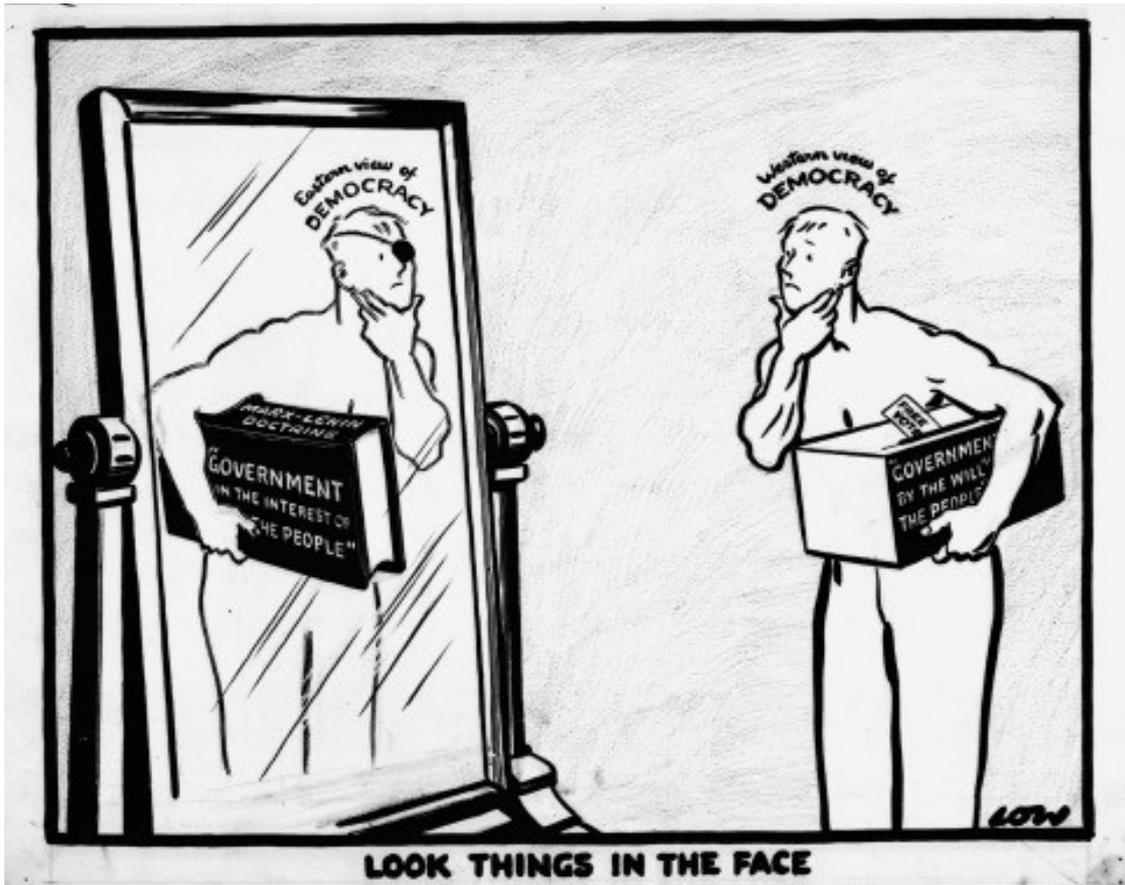


Figure 3. David Low, *Look Things in the Face*, London Evening Standard, 24.10.1945

Post-communist thresholds and artistic epistemology

Post-communist cracks occur as long as relics of the communist experience in people's identities, feelings, memories, and public sites remain in some way palpable or alive. Each person, each collective and each public site which is marked by relics of the communist past, struggles today in one way or the other to hold up a coherent and chronological account of its history – and it is in this struggle, not in the solutions found to it, that the post-communist condition as threshold experience is to be located.

Such a liminal state of non-identity and crisis, as expressed in the notion of post-communist Eastern Europe as transitory threshold, functions however as hypothesized category or unite only. It describes a state whose main common denominator is that of a lack of unifying and coherent attributes. As a threshold it is a distorted, unmediated, and contradictory time-space. Its exploration therefore requires strategies which can work with the fluidity and ambiguity of a reality whose historical ontology is precisely characterized by a lack of identity or consistency. Not only is the post-communist condition then a hypothetical construction which links coeval times of human existence to one socio-historical unity, but it also lacks, as Osborne writes in regards to the hypothesized concept of contemporaneity, a 'socially actual shared subject-position of, or within, our present from the standpoint of which its relational totality could be lived as a whole.'¹³¹ The post-communist threshold thus lacks a clear identity from which it could speak and tell the story or stories of this specific contemporary, ambiguous transitory moment between lost utopias and the struggles accompanying the return of a national democratic state, that is integrated in the global market and, more specifically, that of the European Union.

In the previous chapter I have explored how art allows us to 'know' or access in its own artistic way what is inaccessible to discursive thought. I have described using Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* how art may trigger experiences that urge us to question and change what we know about ourselves and others. In doing so, art does not need a subject position/identity or a specific societal group whose positions it tries to express or represent, but it creates a collective subject that speaks about or translates the ambiguities and tensions of a historical moment through its own constitutive contradictions – or its artistic form. Art then relates to discursive knowledge in a way that it expresses or knows what escapes discursive thought, but at the same time art needs thought or

¹³¹ Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 23.

theory (art seeks towards theory) in order to know, or attempt to know discursively what it says in its artistic way.

Inaccessible to the field of rationalist epistemology and modern cognitive thought it is thus the sphere of the aesthetic that is available or sensitive to the distorted and contradictory realities of the post-communist threshold. Art can internalize and express these ambiguous and evasive realities without automatically taming them by existing discourses or identities (old or new ones). And when brought in touch with an artistic approximation of thought towards the liminal reality captured and reconstructed in art then 'artistic thought' (see Chapter One) can help unfolding *those* elements of reality (truth/Real) that usually escape our thinking and experience. Not in finite arguments, not as a colonization of the liminal or non-identical sphere by our conscious, discursive thought – it is not that we can know the post-communist condition through art, but we can attempt to acknowledge its existence, its particular ambiguous subjectivity, the 'collective subject' that is sensitive to its existence and simultaneous impossibility, and thus try, in the light of the uncanny experiences triggered by artistic expressions of this particular historical truth, to think differently and anew.

1989 in Poland - "Our Polish hell" is both perennial and always new. The Polish version of hell is a caldron of quarrels and fragmentation, of anarchic individualism and telegrams and anger – all with slightly domestic overtones.¹³²

Chapter Three

From the Threshold

Post-communist art and the discontinuum of 'history'

I suggested in the previous chapter that instead of rejecting the notion of post-communist Eastern Europe it should be theorized as a relational and temporary site characterized by a transient threshold experience which was created by the interplay of a disintegrating communist structure and a gradually returning national, capitalist order. I further argued that as a liminal psychosocial reality the post-communist condition is distinguished by a critical potentiality as it crucially challenges existing identities and temporalities that construct modern subject positions. It disturbs a modern sense of historical continuity and progress and therefore opens us to aspects of our past and present which usually escape our perception and knowledge of who we are today and who we could become in future. Real but not knowable by structures that depend on positive and coherent identities and temporalities this liminal state instead offers itself to the sphere of the aesthetic. The current chapter therefore explores the phenomenon of 'post-communist art', asking how we could

¹³² Eva Hoffman, *Exit into History: A Journey through the New Eastern Europe* (London: Heinemann, 1993), 23.

understand post-communist art and its relation to the psychosocial materialities of the post-communist condition as a threshold experience.

I start the chapter with a discussion of the paradigmatic shifts that have shaped the discipline of art history and art critique after 1989, arguing that although the category of post-communist art is a product of these shifts it also breaks with the post-colonial and counter-Western discourses that have emerged from recent debates on contemporary art. I then move on to explore the way in which post-communist art has been understood so far, which leads me to a description of some of the main characteristics of the communist experience and the impact it had on artistic production then and now. I conclude this chapter by suggesting a reading of post-communist art as an expression of the historical dilemma created after the breakdown of communism, thus as an expression of a specific and intensely experienced predicament and therefore not as an anthropological/ethnic category that would describe the art of 'the other'. Reading artworks as post-communist opens Westerners to the uncanny experiences triggered by the post-communist condition and therefore to a disturbing otherness from within.

The ends of art history and the beginnings of post-communist art

Both political and economic debates of the 1980s and 1990s as well as art-historical and art-theoretical accounts of contemporary art during that time were crucially influenced by the discourse on the so-called 'end of history.' From this perspective, contemporary art was increasingly seen as characterized by its incompatibility with modern art historical categories and narratives. In contrast to their modern predecessors and their modernist ambition to creatively expand progress within and through their particular discipline, contemporary artists started to work across genres and traditions. Their works were often strongly characterized by the aim to deconstruct borders between art styles and art historical epochs, to question and blur the realm of art's autonomy, to seek for spaces outside of art institutions, and to develop practices that were incomprehensible to those who were seen as experts on art history and art's role in society. All these shifts had profoundly challenged modern understandings of art and art history, especially since it had become increasingly difficult to distinguish so called art projects from non-artistic forms of social life.¹³³ The more hybrid and open works seemed, as Rebenisch has put it, to escape any logic of development, since '(t)he unbounded (entgrenzt) works not only elude comparisons with art from the past, (...), but they even cannot be

¹³³ The new forms of participation and the integration of art into the social, non-artistic context and the plurality of art as in contrast to clearly distinguishable genres had turned art into a phenomenon whose forms and contents were strongly engaged with the non-artistic realm – see Chapter One.

constituted any longer as something objectively specific/concrete.’¹³⁴ So while formalist modern art had still sought to follow and advance the 'temporal, diachronic, or vertical axis' of art's area of competence, i.e. further its autonomous, aesthetic, and formalist expertise along a linear evolution of aesthetic progress, and while avant-gardistic modern art had urged for a radical 'break with *the past*' to extend art's specific power towards the social and political dimension in society,¹³⁵ contemporary artistic practice had embarked on a post-historical route, or more accurately, on various routes, that could not be traced any longer by any established, Western art historical frame. And while modern art movements had often been radically withdrawn from the realities and objects of everyday life, their forms being often incomprehensible to those who were not trained as artists or art critics, contemporary art started to crop up everywhere, moving so close to the common practices and forms of everyday life (art in the form of political discussion, art in the form of mothering, art as collection of mundane objects, etc.) that in turn it had often become unrecognizable as art and thus unsuitable for a continuation of existing art historical narratives. Some artists and art theorists even spoke of 'the end of art history.'¹³⁶

An important part of these transgressive and post-historical moves of the contemporary art world was also the fact that contemporary art had started to be perceived as appearing and communicating in different 'languages'. In contrast to one major art historical narrative on the developments of art that regarded aesthetic forms as independent of socio-historical sites and cultural environments, artistic practice was increasingly perceived through its interrelation with socio-cultural contexts and their often unknown or unacknowledged 'styles'. In this respect contemporary art was also seen as an expression of the desired end of the binary of a Western art world vs. its periphery. The once hegemonic art world of the modern age, which in popular and influential accounts usually matched a Western understanding of modernity, had started being replaced by a plurality of art worlds. Its distribution and exhibition was no longer organized through one art market, which focused solely on the metropolitan areas in the West, but was influenced by a globalized market dynamic of an increasingly polycentric art world. The biennale structure as new transnational, institutional frame for the exhibition and practice of contemporary art, through which, as Eva Cufer wrote, 'once isolated, subordinate or marginalised cultures can enter the central body of the international artistic system,'¹³⁷ is to be seen as one expression of the globalization and pluralization of the art world.

134 Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst*, 16 (my translation).

135 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), xi.

136 Hervé Fischer, *L'histoire de l'art est terminée* (Paris: Balland, 1981).

137 Eda Cufer, 'Reflections on M3', *platformaSCCA*, December 2000, <http://www.ljudmila.org/scca/platforma2/edaang.htm>.

Consequently, today, '(t)he polycentric practice of art flagrantly contradicts the old claim to a single, universally valid idea of art' and hence also to a single history of art.¹³⁸

Although these developments within contemporary art practice and discourse can be traced back to the 1950s and 60s, the 1989 moment saw a crucial peak and intensification.¹³⁹ With the breakdown of the communist East the division of the world into First, Second and Third world seemed irrevocably shattered, gradually confronting the art world and art market with its limited geography which had so far mostly included art purely from the so-called civilized First World (North America and Western Europe). As a consequence, from 1989 onwards an increased interest in other art worlds, their symbols and forms and art histories had started reshaping exhibition techniques and discourses on art as well as art practices.¹⁴⁰ The idea of 'world art', a colonial notion which has been used to describe the anthropological preservation of art and cultures from anywhere beyond the West, often presenting the exhibited objects as samples of exotic cultures from the periphery and hence as less serious art than that known and practiced by the West, was incrementally substituted by ideas and practices described as 'global art' or art as dwelling in the in-between of cultures and socio-political spheres. 'Global art' was seen as truly contemporary and beyond paradigms, since it approached the phenomenon of art as it emerged from within a globalized world, which in principle had replaced the colonial 'centre vs. periphery' scheme. Art was something that from now on was produced everywhere in the world at the same time, but depending on the context and language, was expressed in diverse ways, following different genealogies and directions.¹⁴¹

What was then often understood as the only remaining universal or transnational common ground of art was a continuous experience and awareness of a simultaneity of difference¹⁴² or

138 Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, 'From Art World to Art Worlds', in *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, ed. Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe; Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2013), 29.

139 The beginnings of this crisis must be situated in relation to the first emancipations of colonized nations and their claim for their unique and ethnically specific culture and history. This coincides with the first developments away from a traditional understanding of modern art (post-1945 era) in the Western world where in the immediate aftermath of World War Two and the Holocaust Hegel's notion of history being a progress towards ever growing freedom was drastically challenged – and with it the traditional understanding of art's universal function and potentiality to express truth and change the world for the better.

140 Two exhibitions are usually mentioned to mark this shift towards a plural art world: *Magiciens de la Terre*, 1989 Paris and Third Havana Biennial in 1989 (Tradition and Contemporaneity), both of which focused on exhibiting art from the non-Western world.

141 Hans Belting, 'From World Art to Global Art: View on a New Panorama', in *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, ed. Andrea Buddensieg, Peter Weibel, and Hans Belting (Karlsruhe; Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2013), 178–85.

142 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Looking at Others', in *Making Art Global (Part 2) 'Magiciens de La Terre' 1989*, ed. Charles Esche and Mark Lewis (London: Afterall, 2013), 260–66.

‘Differenzerfahrung’¹⁴³ making art historians emphasize the need for deconstructing existing Western art historical narratives instead of constructing new ones. Today’s art historical debates, however, seem to have overcome this temporary sense of the ‘end of art history’ and are rather concerned with explorations of how to find more complex and dynamic ways of understanding art historical developments. The vertical way of viewing art history as describing the development of aesthetic forms and artistic practices through movements usually associated with art produced only in Western Europe and Northern America¹⁴⁴ started being countered by horizontal art historical accounts with the latter stressing that there were various often contradictory versions in which the history of art could be told – each of them differing depending on the socio-cultural and historical context from which it was narrated.¹⁴⁵

Critics of this globalization and so-called democratization of art history have, however, highlighted the danger of provoking a ‘relativistic turn’. Even if modernity as a break with mythical world views cannot be thought of without the colonizing power position of the West, its reality as a historical, sociopolitical, and artistic phenomenon in the history of humanity should neither be erased, repressed nor regarded as outdated. Instead, modernity and the idea of universal, transnational principles ought to be understood as an event that was owned and shaped by a range of geopolitical sites where modern paradigms have been articulated in different ways, at different times, and under different historical conditions – hence why many art theorists talk of modernity in the plural. If, on the other hand, attention was directed to specific geopolitical regions in order to highlight the specificity of art coming from these regions, art historical accounts, similar to those of ethnographic accounts, were in danger of pigeonholing artists or social groups according to specific cultural settings instead of allowing them to be seen as active contributors to the universal project of modernity – or of dividing the world instead of allowing it to unite under transcendental aesthetic paradigms. Related to this, another issue repeatedly stressed by art theorists or historians is that the pluralization of the art world subtly reproduces a specific modern relation to ‘the other’ – a relation which these discourses pretend to have left behind. There is a danger of the artist or contemporary art historian, as Hal Foster has argued, ‘to other the other’ as essentially different to a Western self which in this way is surreptitiously preserved.¹⁴⁶ The opening up towards ‘other art’ in order to

143 Rebenisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst*, 186.

144 See for instance: Hal Foster et al., eds., *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011).

145 See for instance: Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel, eds., *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (Karlsruhe; Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2013); Irwin Group, *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (London: Afterall, 2006).

146 Hal Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’, in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), 171–203.

change the Western logic was then not so much a shift that had taken place due to real changes in power relations, but instead the expression of a desire for diversification imposed on the global art market by the Western art scene (its hegemonic subject) itself – with the diversification of art practices allowing the West to feel less Western without having to give up on its hegemonic role entirely.¹⁴⁷

The debate about post-communist or Eastern European art is a product of this crisis of traditional or modern art history and the emergence of a so-called polycentric or global art world. Without the developments described above, which were triggered by the various geopolitical changes of the second half of the twentieth century, we would not be talking about the specificity of post-communist art today. However, the question of post-communist art, and here I mean specifically post-communist art from Eastern Europe, is a special case within this discourse. One which, on the one hand, supports and requires the idea of the pluralization of the art world against a Westernized version of it, but which simultaneously complicates or even questions the often deliberately counter-Western and thus binary views that have developed from such approaches, on the other. For post-communist art as an expression of a threshold experience is, I will argue, a critique not primarily against but from within the modernist and universalist model of the West, showing artistically what is known as the continuity of Western narratives from the perspective of the fragmented and distorted sites of the ‘close other’ Europe as a transitory and temporal ‘grey zone’ within a modern West. As such it is post-communist art that challenges a Western hegemonic structure not by looking at it from the ‘outside’ (the space of the outside other) but by destabilizing the ‘inside-outside’ binary in becoming the other or stranger from within.

The same but different – the presence of the communist experience in post-communist art

When exactly do we call an artwork post-communist? And what are the specificities of post-communist artworks in contrast to other artworks? The use of nomenclature/terminology in recent debates has, as in the case of the notion of post-communism discussed in Chapter Two, not always been clear or coherent. Still, two distinct ways of using the term post-socialist or post-communist in

¹⁴⁷ Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst*, 186; Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’; alternative ways of theorizing the new relation between contemporary art practice and history or the multiplicity of socio-political sites and times it emerges from have been sought in notions such as ‘translation’ or ‘appropriation’. Rather than thinking of art as developing from within and hence also as belonging to fixed, self-contained, and supposedly authentic socio-cultural realities, art could be understood as a culture and act of translation. Globalization, modernity, or colonialism do not mean the same thing in different socio-political sites – neither has every site been permeated by such developments in exactly the same way. Instead, art is seen as constantly and repeatedly rewriting the non-artistic sphere or event it is nevertheless part of. Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst*, 189.

regards to contemporary art can be broadly identified. On the one hand, there are studies that deal with the question of post-socialist/post-communist art globally. These are studies that refer to contemporary art or at least a selection of contemporary art projects as practices that have been shaped by the loss of a socialist or communist utopia on *both* sides of the Iron Curtain. The loss of a socialist or communist alternative as a consequence of the breakdown of Soviet-type communism and the successive reduction of welfare states in the West has crucially shaped the politics of the post-1989 era globally, and post-communist or post-socialist art engages with these shifts in contemporary societies from an artistic perspective. Charity Scribner's *Requiem for Communism*, for example, has been one of the first research projects to elaborate on how literary texts and artworks from both sides of the Iron Curtain have provided artistic forms for mourning the loss of a utopian alternative to the capitalist status quo after the collapse of the Second World in 1989. Here post-communist artworks from the West as well as the 'former East' are constituted as engaging with the breakdown of communist Europe in order to recollect and memorize traces of waning modes of labour, forms of resistance and solidarity, in order to store the emancipatory potentiality of these experiences for the future.¹⁴⁸ A more recent study by Anthony Gardner, on the other hand, uses the category of post-socialist art to explore how contemporary art from Europe, the East as well as the West, has found ways to criticize aesthetically and politically current democratic practices in a time that is marked by a general loss of faith in socialist ideals and models on both sides of the Iron curtain.¹⁴⁹ In each of these cases, contemporary art projects are discussed in regards as to how they can contribute to critical reflections upon the post-socialist condition in its universal/ global meaning.

On the other hand, there are studies which explore as post-socialist/post-communist art contemporary art in former communist countries only – so countries in Central and Eastern Europe that once belonged to the Soviet communist bloc and that have been marked by their return to the capitalist order in the course of the transitions after 1989. In these studies the crucial questions are, firstly, how the socio-historical coordinates that characterize the region of past European communism have had an impact on the forms and contents of contemporary art produced in that region today, and secondly, what these specific art forms may tell us about the post-socialist condition in Eastern Europe or beyond more generally. The works of Boris Groys, Piotr Piotrowski

148 Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism* (London: MIT, 2003). Scribner discusses, for example, how photographers have captured the dematerialized traces of the socialist collective, making these available for collective forms of remembering (Sophie Calle, *The Detachment*, 1996), or how Andrzej Wajda's iconic films, *Man of Marble* (1977) and *Man of Iron* (1981), remember the Polish workers' movement artistically as a moment of the rebirth of democracy in Eastern Europe.

149 Anthony Gardner, *Politically Unbecoming. Postsocialist Art against Democracy* (London: MIT Press, 2015), 8–9.

and Eda Cufer are central in this regard. Since the present study aims at using post-communist art to explore the liminal reality of the post-communist condition as an experience triggered by the disintegration of the communist structure and its gradual replacement by a capitalist order in Eastern European countries after 1989, it is the regional approach that shall be explored further here – although not without referring to the global reality and relevance of this particular art phenomenon from the post-communist threshold. Post-communist art does not tell us something about the specificity of the Eastern European other – but the experiences of the Eastern European other, internalized and translated by post-communist art, tell us something about the crisis of the Western, modern subject more generally. They allow us to think/speak through this crisis, which from within the psychosocial realm of post-communist Eastern Europe, as in contrast to Western European sites, cannot be avoided/repressed that easily.

One of the first art historians to raise the question about the specificity of post-communist or ‘Eastern art’ (Ostkunst) as referring to art from Eastern Europe was German art historian Hans Belting. In his essay *Europe: East and West at the Watershed of Art History*,¹⁵⁰ Belting explored the uncertain unity of a Western art history from the perspective of the intra-European political and ideological divide between East and West which had cut off Eastern European countries from artistic practices and discourses in the West. In his essay Belting demands that contemporary art from Eastern Europe should be assessed and explored on its own terms, not simply incorporated into a Western framework of artistic paradigms. Contemporary art in former communist European countries was not just an adaptation of Eastern European artists to Western styles, but an expression of a specific Eastern European art historical development. Belting stresses that during communist times, modern art, which had been the relevant tradition of artistic practice before the annexation of Eastern European countries to the Soviet bloc, had continued to be practiced and developed in this region despite the official doctrine of Socialist Realism and the latter’s rejection of modern art as a relic of bourgeois capitalist society. Belting claimed further that in former communist countries in Eastern Europe modern art had been mostly practiced as dissident art and therefore under very different socio-historical conditions than in the West. And since today’s post-communist art was strongly influenced by these specific past experiences with modern art practices, Eastern European art had to be given, Belting argued, a specific voice in today’s debates on modern art and its relation to art’s contemporaneity.

150 Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, trans. Caroline Saltzweid and Mitch Cohen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 54–61.

Belting's essay has been rightly criticized for stigmatizing modern Eastern European art as exclusively dissident and for reifying it as 'other art' compared to its bigger, universal Western brother, instead of highlighting that artistic production in each communist country had evolved in different ways and under different circumstances, which would have required a more differentiated analysis than the one presented by Belting. The crucial contribution of Belting's text to debates on the possibility of art history in a postmodern age was, however, his emphasis on the ambiguous character of post-communist art from Eastern Europe. On the one hand, Eastern European art had been formed by an uninterrupted identification by Eastern European artists with modern art in the West and their continuation of Western art practices despite the political divide of Europe and the official prohibition of modern 'bourgeois' art in most communist countries. 'The West', 'Europe' and 'modern art' had not simply disappeared from the art scene in communist Eastern Europe, but remained a central structure many artists identified with. On the other hand, however, Eastern European art practice has been strongly shaped by the particular socio-political conditions that were created by the 'communist' structure and ideology of these countries. The Soviet world did not want to follow in the footsteps of its capitalist other and even if it eventually failed to do so the conscious narratives it had created and political decisions it had taken were all directed towards the aim of creating something different from the capitalist West. The same and yet crucially different – this is how Eastern European art relates to Western art historical accounts and therefore does not only require its own art historical voice but also demands changes in the hegemonic art historical accounts conceptualized by its Western other. Belting therefore suggested a European 'art history written from two points of view or, so to speak, with "two voices" hopefully in harmony.'¹⁵¹

Since Belting's contribution, the phenomenon of post-communist art in Eastern Europe has been explored in various ways from both an art historical and an art theoretical perspective.¹⁵² What all of these accounts have in common is that the experience of Soviet-type communism is seen as having linked the otherwise culturally very heterogeneous region of the Eastern parts of Europe into one contemporary entity, where artistic production is, as Boris Groys has put it, 'haunted by communism' – or by having experienced life and the production of art within a communist

151 Hans Belting, 'Europe: East and West at the Watershed of Art History', in *Art History after Modernism*, trans. Caroline Saltzweid, Mitch Cohen, and Kenneth J. Northcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 61.

152 Phoebe Adler and Duncan McCorquodale, eds., *Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe* (London: Black Dog, 2010); Irwin Group, *East Art Map*; Bojana Pejic et al., eds., *After the Wall : Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe* (Stockholm: Moderna museet, 1999); Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*; Vit Havranek, Jan Verwoert, and Igor Zabel, *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*, ed. Christine Macel and Natasa Petresin (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2010).

structure.¹⁵³ The differences in the common European genealogy of artistic production can therefore be attributed to a specific historical experience that distinguishes these countries and their artistic production from their Western European counterparts, namely the experience of a ‘communist’ episode. This episode, regardless of whether it amounted to the communist ideal or vision as understood in Marxist terms, was characterized by a different political and economical structure as well as a different narration of time than the structures and narratives in the neoliberal West. It had been a societal experiment that was named ‘communist’ or seen as having been moving towards a communist future; it had its own historiography, its own ways of organizing means of production and the circulation of goods as well as its own understanding of the function and value of culture and art. The past experience of this other modern system, as well as the loss of this societal structure and the utopian prospect it once represented is what create the phenomenon of post-communist art today.

Artistic production in communist times

The most significant characteristics of the communist experience in relation to artistic production as usually mentioned in accounts on post-communist art were the experience of Socialist Realism, the experience of modern art practices within a communist structure, the experience of art production without an art market as well as the experience of an art practice that was shaped by a different relation between public and private sphere. In most Eastern European countries Socialist Realism became the official cultural doctrine after the annexation of these countries to the Soviet Union in 1945 – and in most of these countries this form of political art remained the official doctrine for as long as the communist system existed.¹⁵⁴ Constructed as a critique of modern ‘bourgeois’ art and in particular the modern paradigm of art's autonomy the theory behind Socialist Realism saw art as a political tool to advance the right material structure for the new socialist world. In that respect, art's function was to picture and construct the world from a proletarian perspective and to create communist images, spaces or buildings while its inhabitants were in the process of moving towards this other future.

This meant that artists had to forgo, for the first time in modern history, their institutional autonomy, whereas paradoxically the political sphere had taken on, as Groys argued in *The Total Art of Stalinism*, the role of an avant-garde artist. During Stalinism it had been the politicians that were

153 Boris Groys, ‘Haunted by Communism’, in *Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe*, ed. Phoebe Adler and Duncan McCorquodale (London: Black Dog, 2010), 18–27.

154 With the exception of Poland and Yugoslavia (see Chapter Four).

trying to revolutionize the world in its totality, treating the present and organic world like avant-garde artists had treated the dynamics and constellations of an avant-gardistic work. Artistic procedures with their irrational, intuitional, and risky elements had entered politics, which 'was transformed into a kind of artist whose material was the entire world and whose goal was to “overcome resistance” of this material and make it pliant, malleable, capable of assuming any desired form.’¹⁵⁵ Art, on the other hand, had become only one of many means in order to realize this political creation of a new societal totality. How it could achieve this was however not decided by artists themselves, based on artistic considerations or experiences, but by respective authorities who set up the necessary plans according to which artists had to adjust their work.

The aim of art that was produced according to Socialist Realist paradigms was therefore not to create and explore the purposeless and sublime objects of a Kantian understanding of art, nor to disturb existing world views or ideologies, but to support and advance one specific, namely socialist, ideology that was hegemonic within these contexts – and shape the world in accordance with this ideology. The purposeless, autonomous art of the West had turned into a pragmatist, ideological tool. And although the centrality of Socialist Realism had changed over the years and had also developed in very different ways in each of the respective countries (see Chapter Four and the example of Poland), it had still shaped artistic production in all former communist countries in one way or the other, with this particular experience of the politicization of art distinguishing Eastern European art from artistic trajectories followed in the West.

Parallel to, and in strong tension with art produced according to the paradigms of Socialist Realism, modern art practices continued to influence the art scene in the East despite their official prohibition in most communist countries. In his detailed study of art and the avant-garde in Eastern and Central Europe before the 1989 transition, Piotr Piotrowski has demonstrated how rich and diverse the history of modern art in former communist countries has been.¹⁵⁶ Although in most countries only practiced by underground (as in contrast to official) art movements, artistic styles such as Surrealism, art informel (abstract expressionism) or neo-constructivist art, as well as, more contemporary approaches that evolved from these modern practices such as conceptual and performance art, had all crucially shaped the discourses and practices of artists in the former communist East. The meaning that these modern and postmodern art movements had acquired in relation to the societal conditions of communist times was however very different from the meaning

155 Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism* (London ; New York: Verso, 2011), 3.

156 Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*, trans. Anna Brzyski (London: Reaktion, 2009).

ascribed to these art movements in the West, where modern and postmodern art developed in relative freedom. Happenings and body art were, for example, not practiced as critique of abstract and withdrawn modern art forms as it was the case in the West, but as a positive affirmation of modern and Western art paradigms against the ideological art of the socialist state apparatus.¹⁵⁷ Embracing the autonomy and purposelessness of art was thus not experienced as a blind reproduction of a withdrawn and a-political art institution, as it has been perceived by various neo-avant-garde movements in the West, but in turn was experienced as an act of resistance and as an opening up of a societal realm or reality that could stay free from socialist ideology.

Another commonality that was seen as characteristic for the communist experience and as linked to post-communist art is the experience of artistic production without an art market which mainly means that the production of art had not been linked to a monetary structure. Artists were therefore free from the pressure of having to sell their work. They did not have to earn a salary by selling art pieces and neither was the value of artworks influenced by the fact of whether they could or would be sold. Nor did artists have to think strategically in an economic sense whether the participation in a specific exhibition would advance an artist's professional career that would secure his or her ability to sustain him or herself through the production of art in future. Instead, the value of an artwork was either given by the party, which either accepted a work as socialist or not, or by those opposing official party politics using art and their autonomous, and often clandestine, structures that had developed over the years. Art in the past communist world had thus no commercial but purely ideological or counter-ideological value. Even when it tried to free itself from ideology by focusing solely on aesthetic paradigms this withdrawal from ideology was in most cases a political act against the political status quo which regarded autonomous, non-ideological art as a relic of the capitalist past. On the other hand, the lack of an art market also meant that artists were more dependent on the state apparatus which financed specific art projects and provided the logistical structure necessary for their work. If they refused to cooperate with the party, not only the texture of their art projects was directly influenced by the conditions that applied when producing art outside of or beyond the officially allowed or tolerated sphere, which often included a lack of financial means or public exhibition spaces – something that characterizes art in the West too, when artists try to produce art that is not funded or supported by the existing institutional frame - but was also always accompanied by the real threat of works being censored and artists being legally persecuted or even punished. Producing art beyond the official structure did not only mean an existential threat to the artist in terms of his or her ability to sustain him or herself through his or her art, but a

157 Ibid.

political threat with no legal structure that would protect the freedom of artists to develop their art beyond what was officially allowed. Producing 'free' art thus required skills that allowed artists to circumvent the legal and political apparatus.

Lastly, what has also been seen as having crucially defined artistic practice in communist countries is the specific type of public space and its relation to the private sphere that existed in the context of a communist model. In contrast to Western, capitalist countries, communist countries did not emphasize the distinction between 'res privata' and 'res publica'. Private life was supposed to be lived and thought in a socialist or communist way – there were ways of dressing in a communist way, of cooking in a communist way, and of decorating a communist household. This did not mean that everyday life was automatically and unavoidably structured by official ideology, but it meant that people found themselves repeatedly in the position of having to negotiate to which extent they wanted and were able to confirm and reproduce communist ideology in flats and private conversations or when it was necessary or desirable to resist these socialist hegemonic structures through counter-hegemonic (although not always intended in a counter-political way) practices, representations, and memories.¹⁵⁸ One of communism's achievements was then, as Eva Hoffman writes, that it

forced people to make difficult, risky, ethical choices often and under considerable pressure. Just about everyone had to decide, at one time or another, whether he or she was for or against, whether to raise a hand at a meeting to approve someone's destruction or to leave it at one's side, thus approving one's own; whether to inform on a neighbor, sign a dangerous petition, stand by silently during an anti-Semitic campaign, or risk imprisonment by protest.¹⁵⁹

The everyday in public and private life was therefore not one-dimensionally produced and occupied by official ideology, but usually a result of constant negotiations between official ideals and policies on the one hand, and pre-communist discourses, practices, and ethics as well as unprocessed experiences and subjective desires contradicting the demands of the official sphere, on the other. As a consequence, public political dissent, including the dissent expressed through particular art practices, took on more subtle and indirect forms than political dissent fantasized or enacted in Western European countries. Not public marches or occupations, but e.g. 'Hanging out'¹⁶⁰ (forms of wasting time) as a resistance to the continuous pressure of an ideology obsessed with the

158 David Crowley and Susan Emily Reid, eds., *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, First Edition edition (Oxford; New York: Berg 3PL, 2002), 12–13.

159 Hoffman, *Exit into History*, xiv.

160 Crowley and Reid, *Socialist Spaces*, 16.

importance of collective labour, or the use of encrypted symbols that were attached to clothes or added to literary texts or movies in ways that they would bypass official censorship, were only some of the ways of expressing resistance against the regime's official ideology.¹⁶¹

Post-communist art: 'Third Way' or 'No way'?

If from an art-historical perspective today's contemporary art from Eastern Europe shows similarities with contemporary art from Western European countries, the suggestion would be that in each case contemporary art in Eastern as well as Western Europe is defined by its attempts to break free from or react to modern paradigms and movements, characteristic of artistic production before 1989 on both sides of the Iron Curtain. On the other hand, however, post-1989 art in Eastern Europe pushes against different modern histories and experiences than its counterparts in the West. The experience of having produced art without an art market as well as the experience of Socialist Realism and the state's surveillance machinery, which allowed only specific, ideologically conformist art projects, and also the experience of having to negotiate artistic practices around a different model of a public and private sphere – all of these experiences and their intertwinement with memories of everyday life under communism have not simply dissolved after the transitions of 1989 but they emerge, as argued in the accounts described above, in one way or another in contemporary art from today's Eastern European countries. Furthermore, the memories of a non-capitalist mode of artistic production are also not simply negative or traumatic, but of an ambiguous character - and they have 'complexity and depth that utopian abstractions are lacking.'¹⁶² Art theorists have thus claimed that reactualizations and reevaluations of the experiences of communism return in today's art from former communist countries. These returns often take the form of a general mistrust of official structures and ideologies (whether in the political or the artistic sphere) while paradoxically being characterized by an idealism or utopianism that to this extent cannot be found in Western art.¹⁶³

Peter Weibel called this specific identity that post-communist artists have been able to establish a 'Third Way'. The experiences made during communist times did not simply vanish, nor could they

161 'In their commitment to charters and "samizdat" publications, their dissent tended to be literary (symbolic) rather than embodied' with protest having taken on the form of subtle gestures that still remain often invisible to the Western gaze.' Ibid.; see also: Jan Kubik, *The Power of Symbols Against the Symbols of Power: The Rise of Solidarity and the Fall of State Socialism in Poland* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Havranek, Verwoert, and Zabel, *Promises of the Past*, 20.

162 Groys, 'Haunted by Communism', 20–21.

163 '(A)rtistic visions of emancipatory alternatives are utopian and dystopian at the same time.' Ibid., 21; Jan Verwoert, 'Not so Elsewhere (!-?)', in *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*, ed. Christine Macel and Natasa Petresin (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2010).

have been simply repressed after 1989. At the same time, however, many Eastern European artists, just like many other people in Eastern Europe, had hoped for a ‘normalization’ and legitimization of their realities as Western or ‘normal’, without having to explore or refer to their ‘communist’ psychosocial textures. ‘We want to be a normal country, with a normal economy, a normal political system, with a normal lifestyle. Normal – one among many,’ said Hungarian artist Akos Szilagyi in 2006.¹⁶⁴ So when after 1989 artists tried to define their specific place within the re-opened structure of a global art market, they were confronted, as Weibel argued, with a historical dilemma. Artists from former communist countries, Weibel writes,

could not or did not want to conform to either one or the other system (of artistic production _ ms), neither to the political nor to the consumeristic one. Nor were they able to deny either of the two systems which had existed on one as well as on the other side of the wall. They found themselves confronted with a dilemma: if they made recourse to their own erstwhile avant-garde (to artistic practice before 1945 _ ms) then they did not produce anything that reflected the current political realities of their home countries. If they made recourse to solutions of the Western avant-garde, they referred to experiences and aesthetics which neither were connected in the slightest to their current situation and life – such an approach would have been escapist and illusionistic too. Therefore the only solution left was to draw on the formalist achievements of their past avant-garde while simultaneously connecting these to all historical experiences and the formal language of Socialist Realism as well as to other traditional cultural sources of their countries. By doing so they lifted the spell their own country had imposed on history – a courageous act; simultaneously they did not succumb to the West's temptations – another courageous act. They created their art from historical experiences (e.g. folklore as found-object) as much as from the history of their erstwhile avant-garde. They created a third way.¹⁶⁵

For Weibel this third way meant that contemporary artists from Eastern European countries had managed to combine experiences of Soviet-type communism with those related to pre-communist, modern artistic forms or narratives that had also shaped artistic practices in this region. They did this creatively and without having to adhere to any existing official historical narrative. In contrast to the political as well as economic sphere, artistic practice in post-1989 Eastern Europe had therefore become a space in which the specificity of the post-communist site, its disrupted temporality and lack of historical direction, was explored and expressed in its own, socio-historically particular way – an artistic movement Weibel called the ‘Retroavantgarde’.

164 Quoted in Bojana Pejic et al., *After the Wall*, 16; See also Bojana Pejic, ‘The Dialectics of Normality’.

165 Peter Weibel, ‘Der Kalte Krieg und die Kunst’, in *Zurück aus der Zukunft: Osteuropäische Kulturen im Zeitalter des Postkommunismus*, ed. Boris Groys, Anne von der Heiden, and Peter Weibel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2005), 53.

Art-historical and art-theoretical arguments on the specificity of post-communist art, like the ones by Peter Weibel or Hans Belting, have had a crucial impact on our understanding of the post-communist site. They raised an awareness of the significance of the communist experience and the subtle differences in contemporary art practices in Europe that resulted from the traces of this other yet familiar socio-political past. In these discourses, communism is brought up as part of European history and is discussed as a more complex and ambiguous reality than is often the case in discourses on the political as well as economic transformations of these countries. Furthermore, these contributions have also highlighted how the artistic sphere has provided an opportunity for dealing with the relics of the communist experience in Europe in a different way, the pressures to adjust to existing structures and narratives not being as high as those in regards to the political and economic transitions in former communist countries after 1989. Post-communist art can therefore be seen as a medium for exploring the specificity of the post-1989 moment as it has been created in Eastern European countries due to the breakdown of a communist structure and the historical dilemma that came along with it.

In contrast to projects that refer to these developments in order to pose post-communist art as a new genre and that tend to describe it as a specific art-historical style representing a cultural reality specific to Eastern European countries, I want to understand post-communist art rather as an expression of the historical dilemma created by the breakdown of European communism itself and therefore as an expression of the post-communist condition as threshold experience as developed in the previous chapter. The specificity of post-communist art would then not indicate a solution to or sublation of the dilemma from which post-communist art as a new and particular art style had emerged. Instead, post-communist art should be understood as an artistic expression of a broader predicament and crisis that arose once the relations, identities, and narratives, which had been established throughout ‘the age of extremes,’¹⁶⁶ were shattered, with no preformed narrative being able to make instant sense of the present transitory moment. This crisis was not something specific to Eastern European countries, but it was in this geopolitical area that it was experienced in an intensified and accelerated way.¹⁶⁷ Post-communist art and the disturbed societal fabric it mimics and translates does therefore not refer to a new art-historical style or particular voice that could be added to the chorus of Western art history and practice (remember Belting’s two voices). Rather post-communist art as I understand it in this study, is itself an artistic expression of experienced

166 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1995).

167 Modern subject positions were shattered in the East more radically in terms of the speed as well as in terms of the actual changes in people’s lives than the post-communist shifts experienced in the West.

discontinuity and disruption: it is the stutter, slip, or inhibition of a Western (European) voice that since 1989 has seemingly regained its strength – in the political, economic and artistic field alike.

European history, its objects, events, and experiences, emerge through this artistic work in unordered and unexpected ways, with relics of Soviet-type communism returning together with relics of pre-communist events and merging in each artwork with elements of the post-1989 rupture. In the experiences triggered by post-communist art hopes and catastrophes of the past century are cited and assembled in unexpected constellations – each time in different ways but often held together by a political as well as artistic idealism, which had been both animated as well as frustrated by the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and which still haunts today's Europe in an ambiguous and unresolved way.

Jan Verwoert wrote that artworks have the power to '*manifest other conditions of historical experience*' than, for example, historiographic accounts or oral accounts given by witnesses of specific time periods. They do this, Verwoert writes, by 'positing a different conceptual vantage point from which to approach the reality of our surroundings.'¹⁶⁸ The vantage point of post-communist art is then that of an experienced temporal collapse of modern history in the wake of the simultaneously experienced collapse of grand utopian narratives. It is the vantage point of a crisis that calls into question everything that constitutes us as modern subjects; from where the images and narratives that tell us about who we think we are, were, and could still become, are questioned. This is a vantage point from which the past does not enter our present in familiar ways and neither does it offer a clear direction towards a different future. So if I started this project in order to know more about the communist past through post-communist art, allowing us to explore artistic and unexpected reactualizations of the communist experience, other than the ones that can be found in common accounts, I now argue that the specific character of post-communist art precisely dodges such chronological understanding of the present moment as one that is characterized by the relics of the most recent experience. The fantasy or desire to find some concrete clue as to how repeat the communist experiment in a better and more progressive way, or the assumption of encountering solely 'communist ghosts,' i.e. experiences, hopes, or fears that are related to the experiment of a communist society, is disappointed. Instead, what we are confronted with through the vantage point of the post-communist artwork or art event is a confrontation with (modern) dreamworlds and catastrophes we would least expect – not because we are generally unaware of them, but because, as

168 Verwoert, 'Not so Elsewhere (!-?)', 32.

we will see in the following chapters, they return in constellations and surroundings in which we would have not placed or imagined them.

Attempting to resist a clear position on the binary continuum of Western normalization vs. specific Eastern European identity, post-communist art as used in this study thus describes a temporary phenomenon that expresses artistically the expulsion from the chronology of modern progress. It does not offer us an alternative image of the communist past but nor does it simply allow for a different, more diverse image or structure of modernity, turning for example one hegemonic view of modern life into a multifaceted or multilayered version of European art as a new subsection of global art. Instead, post-communist art becomes an expression of the collapse of the temporal continuity and structural maps characterizing modern Western life more generally and thus an expression of the rupture or discontinuity that has been caused by the breakdown of the communist East. From within the experience of such an intensely experienced rupture, history is not actualized in continuities but always as a fleeting and assembled constellation or montage of various forgotten and unprocessed ghosts, gaps and open questions, which suddenly emerge when having to find a place beyond or between communist, neoliberal or conservative national ideologies – which means from within a profoundly unknown and repressed space as well as time.

This is not post-history – but the attempt to see art as an engagement with history without the structuring force of dominant historical narratives or identities. Neither is this simply negative, but an attempt to understand art which relates to or emerges from a specific socio-historical moment or event as an impulse for a non-identical experience that demands new and speculative/artistic thought about who we are or could become in the future.

Finally, if post-communist art is viewed as an expression of the post-communist condition as a threshold experience then it is also an expression of a transitory space that does not only trouble the Eastern European subject, who desperately needs to find a stable ground and identity, but that also makes the Western European subject – or Western artist or art historian – feel uneasy since it reminds the hegemonic subject of some kind of otherness or other/communist experience from within. With this in mind a short detour back to Belting's account of art from Eastern and Western Europe can provide further insight in regards to the relational character of the phenomenon of post-communist art. In a point that has been often overlooked in discussions of his essay, Belting tried to explain why so-called 'Ostkunst' has been neglected by art historians and art theorists in the West. Focusing more specifically on the condensed East/West relation in Germany he writes that for

Western art historians exploring so called 'Ostkunst' as different from 'Westkunst' had been equal to an acceptance or recognition of the political system in the GDR.¹⁶⁹ The presence of 'Ostkunst' as an art phenomenon that would have to be taken seriously, whether in its contemporary form or as art that had been produced during communist times, demanded from the Western art historian a deferred legitimization of a communist system whose aim it had been to substitute modern societies in the West. Or to put it in other words, an engagement with art from the former East and an acknowledgment of an artistic value that was specific to this art required the Western subject to accept indirectly the potentiality of the finitude or fragility of the 'West' - and thus at least hypothetically the existence of post-Western or post-capitalist societies or the possibility of a future in which the neoliberal West as we know it would no longer exist.

Site-specific art in and from Eastern Europe as post-communist

But if this 'other art' within a modern, Western context, characterized by relics of the communist experience and the ambiguous realities of the post-communist threshold, is not to be understood as a new style that is marked by specific aesthetic features and a particular genealogy of artistic strategies, but is instead to be seen as an expression of the distortion that has been caused in common accounts of contemporary art by relics of the communist experience, how can we then regard or recognize an artwork as post-communist? Considering artworks as post-communist simply based on the nationality of artists contradicts the present approach that aims at stressing the non-identical character of the phenomenon of post-communist art, for such a methodological approach contributes to the restoration of national narratives that aim to restore continuities in historical accounts. On the other hand, however, refraining from narrowing down the selection of artworks to a regional phenomenon that is aligned with the transitory zone and the historical experiences that are specific to Eastern Europe reduces significantly the intensity with which post-communist artworks are connected to the experienced breakdown of the communist structure and the phase that emerged after.

In order to deal with this methodological difficulty I decided to prioritize in the present study the role of the post-communist *site* as a psychosocial materiality, which enters or relates to the contemporary artwork through its open and engaged condition, over the predominant categorization of an artwork as post-communist based on the national identity of the artist only. All artworks discussed here are therefore contemporary artworks which combine various media, such as film,

169 Hans Belting, *Die Deutschen Und Ihre Kunst: Ein Schwieriges Erbe* (München: C.H. Beck, 1992).

sculpture, performance, or installation art. What they all have in common is their closeness to the public site – their openness to places, objects, and people from the inside and the outside of the art world that become the material of the artwork itself. Each artwork as a site-specific artwork then mimics, translates and intervenes in the societal fabric of sites that have been affected by or that through the artwork are confronted with the intensified post-communist dilemma that was triggered by the breakdown of communism and the subsequent, temporal lack of historical coherence.

So, if post-communist artworks are works that engage with the historical predicament created by the communist experience and the 1989 transitions in Eastern Europe, then this can manifest itself in at least two ways – if not in more. Either artworks are conceptualized by artists who have been trained in Eastern European countries and who for that reason also experienced the post-communist shifts themselves (see Chapter Five and Chapter Seven) and thus integrate through their experiences and struggles the socio-historically specific predicament of the post-communist site into the artwork. In this case the post-communist site ‘enters’ the artwork’s constellation through the artist’s subjectivity (vs. artist’s nationality). Or, artworks can be seen or read as post-communist if they engage with the social fabric or with objects or public places belonging to post-communist sites more directly – in which case the post-communist site would ‘enter’ the artwork through the places, people, or events in post-communist Eastern Europe that have become the material of relevant artistic interventions themselves (see Chapter Five).

In each case, however, I see post-communist art not as a fixed phenomenon ‘out there’ - not as a pot filled with particular artworks that are post-communist in contrast to others which are not; but rather as a phenomenon or some kind of truth that we come to know when specific artworks are read or unfolded as post-communist artworks (unfolding through the interaction between art and thought). This means that the concept of post-communism is used as a tool to work with and to read relevant artworks in order to highlight their interrelation with a specific socio-historical fabric and its disturbing relation to those identity structures that are in the process of being restored after the transitions in 1989. Post-communism as well as post-communist art are therefore not to be understood as pre-formed socio-cultural categories, but as conceptual tools that allow us to extract in a speculative, artistic manner what the world and history looks like – or what ‘Westerners’ look like – from a specific, disturbed and ambiguous vantage point – namely from within the transitory threshold that opened up after the breakdown of European communism.

The following chapters explore this post-communist crack or stutter mediated by readings of specific art events or art projects. Starting with a speculative discussion of recent art phenomena in Poland and their relation to established art discourses, I move on to discuss particular artworks, which take me in my exploration of the post-communist condition from sites in Warsaw to irruptions of post-communist ruptures in Berlin and London. Although not always present as a physical site, Eastern Europe as it is actualized in this study emerges furthermore predominantly in relation to realities in 'Poland.' As such Poland is not, however, actualized as a national category, but it emerges in the uncanny, displaced and relational form, which I have described as characteristic for the liminal reality of the post-communist condition. The 'Poland' as it has entered this study is almost never in the place it ought to be from a national or geographical perspective – when *in* Poland it is transformed by a non-Polish artist (Chapter Five). *Outside* of Poland it exists only in tension with its Western European other without which it would cease to exist (Chapter Six and Chapter Seven). 'Poland' as a signifier thus takes on in this study the position of the hypothesized, liminal post-communist place. And it does so not because the 'Polish site' is better suited to explore the post-communist condition as threshold experience than other Eastern European sites, although there are some aspects that make this socio-cultural context particularly interesting such as the short period of Socialist Realism, the relatively intense period of autonomous art practice, the specific type of communism that was less totalitarian than in other Eastern European countries, and hence the strong links to Western culture that were maintained during the communist period, turning Poland into some kind of an 'in-between' case itself (see Chapter Four).

The main reason why 'Poland' has become and was also kept as a symbolical/artistic frame for the present study is because 'Poland' is my personal signifier for the particular socio-historical liminality of the post-communist condition. It is a symbol which signifies to me what escapes my knowledge about who I am, have been or could become. It is the place I am from but do not belong to. In my personal map of signifiers it is therefore the name for an unreachable yet known place – unattainable and yet filled with desire. One reason why this project developed into a project on the post-communist condition as a threshold experience is thus among others linked to the enigmas or gaps that characterize my own journey. It is not what I know about myself that drives me to write this thesis, but precisely what escapes my knowledge. It is not an aspect of my subjectivity or a specific identity which I want to emphasize in this argument or of which I could give an account in order to then deduct it from the universal or objective claims I try to make. But it is precisely what escapes my knowledge about myself that has been interwoven symbolically with the thoughts developed in the following chapters by suturing them with this subjective and thus particular thread.

This, however, does not mean that the angle from which I explore and discuss the artworks is my personal life story – it almost never is. Instead I weave my transdisciplinary discussions of artworks by exploring the sites, concepts, and objects these artworks work with or transform. I try to allow the artwork and the encounters it has triggered to guide and shape my thought or theory. But keeping this ‘Polish’ frame or thread as a symbolic (artistic) feature of the constellation means that the argument may suddenly and unexpectedly provoke feelings or thoughts which I usually hide. It is thus from the position of a vulnerable subject that this argument evolves. The aim is not to withdraw my subjectivity in order to be able to explore a neutral objective reality, nor to control and capture the object through abstract categories, but to allow for the object of the study to come to life and have an effect – or to change the way we think about ourselves and others. It is not a story about myself, but a story about Europe and the West which shall make us pay attention to experiences and sites we usually ignore.

PART III

**The sites
and a second beginning**

Chapter Four

Avant-gardistic demands for pragmatic change

The political and autonomous ghosts of post-communist art in Poland before and after 1989

Post-communist art is haunted by communism. Precisely because of its ‘communist ghosts’, i.e. the relics of a historical experience which from a national and neoliberal perspective appear as non-sensical or even threatening and which accompany and drive this art, it is disruptive/uncanny art. Post-communist art is an expression of the predicament and crisis caused by the collapse of relations, narratives, and identities that used to characterize the ‘age of extremes’. In this context post-communist art can be read as art that speaks from within the experience of having been thrown out of the chronology and space of modern progress and as such it haunts those discourses which seek to reestablish or preserve identity structures or narratives that would strengthen or restore pre-1989 structures. It does so by actualizing 'Eastern Europe' as something that does not reflect what a national or Western gaze expects. Instead of seeing in it a reflection of a coherent history and known struggles the Western gaze finds in this art traces of ventures and experiences (past hopes

and catastrophes) which from the perspective of the new hegemonic formations after 1989 are kept repressed.

In this chapter I want to explore this ghostly character of post-communist art further by focusing on artistic practice in and from Poland more specifically. The contemporary art phenomena I will look at in this context are the so-called Critical Art and Applied Social Arts which have been seen as characteristic, in one way or the other, of artistic production in Poland after 1989. I will discuss in which way these contemporary art forms drag us back to traumatic experiences related to the historical avant-garde and its main concern with the relation between art and life or art and politics. I will argue that in comparison to common accounts of today's meaning of contemporary art that have been developed predominantly in relation to art from Western Europe and North America post-communist art re-actualizes experiences of the twentieth century that in today's hegemonic art discourse are normally repressed. I argue that while causing an interruption of and shock to existing, hegemonic ideas on the function and role of art, post-communist art from Poland challenges precisely the idea that art is reduced to causing irruptions and critique. Instead, applied social art seeks interventionist, directed ruptures that not only disturb but also create, heal, or transform and by doing so it asks for a reengagement with the idea of a politicized art that is at odds with what is usually tolerated within today's art world.

Post-communist art in Poland after 1989

Artistic production in Poland in the 1990s was strongly influenced by a phenomenon which was called 'Critical Art'. The term Critical Art referred to art projects that were often situated in public sites and were characterized by their unconventional, provocative, or even scandalous contents or forms: a sculpture created out of four stuffed animals, two of which (a horse and a cock) had been killed by the artist herself, with a video installed next to the finalized sculpture documenting in detail the gruesome process of killing and dying (Katarzyna Kozyra, *Animal Pyramid*, 1993); a Lego version of a concentration camp analyzing artistically the tools and effects of mass culture and the commercialization of suffering (Zbigniew Libera, *Lego. Concentration Camp*, 1996); or statues of Christian icons like Virgin Mary and Christ stored in aquariums mimicking decorations or accessories of a new emerging Polish identity (Robert Rumas, *Dedications I, II, III*, 1992).

Although often working with objects and phenomena of the non-artistic sphere and in some cases even situated in public places the aim of these critical artworks was not so much a political one,

which means that critical artists of that time did not try to actively participate in building up the new democratic structure of the post-1989 era. Instead they aimed at disturbing emerging or existing public discourses and rituals by entering as artists the post-1989 socio-political transitions. In a time when public actors and institutions were constructing new or reviving old narratives for defining the regained Polish nation state, artists in Poland sought to influence this process from the perspective of radical yet free/autonomous critics. More specifically, their aim was not to offer alternative strategies or policies but, firstly, to challenge societal standards and traditions as these were in the process of becoming the new status-quo and simultaneously to take advantage of the transitional phase the country was in to also confront, as artists, societal taboos.¹⁷⁰

Piotrowski compared this phenomenon of a publicly present and radical form of art practice with an 'agorophilic' condition which was characterized by an increased need to be present in open, public spaces. After years of having been excluded structurally as free artists from the public sphere the 1990s saw suddenly in former communist countries an unprecedented return of artistic interventions into public spaces and discourses. 'The strategies of limiting political social participation and of restricting culture and cultural production constituted, irrespective of the degree of actual restrictions', Piotrowski writes, 'an important part of communist rule and served as an instrument of the cultural policies carried out by the state apparatus.'¹⁷¹ Consequently, reclaiming the right of free speech and realizing specific forms of creative and cultural freedoms right at the centre of the public sphere was thus an urge that characterized art from all former communist countries, including Poland.

However, this type of expressive critical art practice and with it its artistic forms as they emerged in post-1989 Poland were not something that was exclusive to the Polish or post-communist context. In fact, Critical Art of the 1990s has been repeatedly compared to the so-called Young British Artists in the UK.¹⁷² But what was indeed exceptional, and what could therefore be seen as symptomatic for the particularity of this critical art and its relation to the specific socio-historical context, were the

170 Grzegorz Kowalski who taught many of these critical and controversial artists at the Warsaw Academy of Art said: 'The artist is called to question obligatory standards. But must remember that he/she will be judged according to these standards. He/she therefore must accept the risk that society will reject and condemn him/her.' Critical Art hence was understood as a practice that remained different from societal norms and structures but which had the task to criticize and challenge these. It did not change these norms directly, did not participate in processes that would normalize certain forms of collective life, but it made their unquestioned existence more difficult.

171 Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, 7.

172 See for example the exhibition *British British Polish Polish* curated by Marek Goździewski and Tom Morton: 'British British Polish Polish: Art from Europe's Edges in the Long '90s and Today', accessed 1 June 2017, <http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/32268/british-british-polish-polish-art-from-europe-s-edges-in-the-long-90s-and-today/>.

reactions these radical art interventions had provoked in Poland – which were very different from the reactions triggered by their Western counter-parts.¹⁷³ While in Britain artworks by Tracy Emin or Damien Hirst had caused, if at all, only some scandalized headlines, artists in Poland were regularly confronted with an actual agitation against critical art by the media and the public.¹⁷⁴ Court trials were a common byproduct of these art projects as were cases in which public artworks were vandalized or their exhibitions prohibited or censored due to the pressure exerted by state or church institutions. The case of Dorota Nieznalska who was sentenced to six months of restricted freedom and community work on accounts of blasphemy and who was forced to remove from the exhibition space her artwork *Passion* (2001), which showed an image of male genitals upon a metal Greek cross, became emblematic for a series of cases in which artists were taken to court.¹⁷⁵ It was also not unusual for members of the audience (whether they were confronted with artworks inside of artistic institutions or within the public space), to interrupt performances or destroy exhibits which they found too offensive.

So while in the 1990s artists in Poland were using their new or regained autonomous institutional position (their autonomy protected by law) to challenge the emerging public and political space as it was created in the course of the socio-political transitions after the breakdown of the communist structure, the public reacted with a hostile attack against their provocative works, trying to silence these voices of the cultural sphere and hence showing a strong discomfort with the freedom of expression that otherwise at that time in Poland – like in other Western democratic countries – was so heavily celebrated. What this art expressed went beyond what many people wanted to hear or see. And it expressed it when no defense mechanisms were ready at hand to channel the cracking and discomfiting sounds coming from an autonomous and rebellious art scene which suddenly and unexpectedly had occupied a central place within the public realm.

It was within this lauded, unsettled and transitional environment that yet another approach towards art's engagement with the public sphere developed. An approach that reacted directly to the experiences made by critical artists in Poland after 1989, but one that sought to take art's involvement with public life even further. In his *Manifesto of Applied Social Arts*¹⁷⁶ the

173 Agata Pyzik, *Poor but Sexy: Culture Clashes in Europe East and West* (Zero Books, 2014), 172.

174 Such public outrages were also common in other Eastern European countries (examples) but there had been only two countries in which artists were taken to court on a regular basis: Poland and Russia. Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*.

175 Or the case of Rafal Betlejewski who in 2010 was arrested by the police when spraying 'I miss you Jew' in areas that used to belong to the Jewish community before World War Two.

176 Artur Żmijewski, 'Applied Social Arts', *Krytyka Polityczna* 11–12 (2007).

internationally known Polish artist Artur Żmijewski demanded that artistic practice ought to have an actual impact on societal life. While many Polish artists were disappointed by the aggressive reactions they had been exposed to by the public and often agreed to adjust their pieces in order to avoid further conflicts, Żmijewski, on the other hand, interpreted these open conflicts as proof of art's ability to challenge the societal status quo and influence the way life was lived collectively. Not only was art able to interrupt, disturb, and reflect upon how society was developing from its specific, autonomous sphere, but it could also have a direct, although still artistic, impact on societal structures. Art was thus less to be understood as a virus that spreads and attacks the system without control. It rather ought to be seen as an algorithm calculated through the means available to the artist, means and methods that create aesthetic in contrast to epistemological or political objects or actions, and intended to intervene into the societal sphere in order to change its constellation in a desired, if not conceptually or scientifically evolved, way. Consequently, Żmijewski argued, art should not only critically depict and evaluate reality but actively and practically change it. It was in a way art's obligation to shape what present society could become on equal terms and in a dialogue with politics and science.

Echoing the agitational demands of later periods of the Russian Avant-garde, in which artists like Arvatov had called for the art world not only to contemplate and organize societal developments but become active 'colleagues of scholars, engineers, and administrators,'¹⁷⁷ Żmijewski asked for a collaboration of art, politics, and science. He encouraged artists not to remain within their autonomous space but to use or instrumentalize their legal position as artists as well as the specificity of artistic tools (their knowledge of how to create aesthetic objects) strategically to get actively involved in the formation of societal life and amend processes in the public which usually were seen as belonging to the area of responsibility of politicians and scientists. Piotrowski called this approach 'political autonomy',¹⁷⁸ stressing that despite the strong pragmatic and agitational demands applied social art ought to remain structurally or legally autonomous and free from decisions or developments of the political or scientific apparatus. In Żmijewski's view the art events of the 1990s had shown that artists had touched on or visualized realities which otherwise would have been kept repressed and by using this power of art in a strategic and systematic way art could contribute to a radical reorganization of societal life. 'Today', however, Żmijewski writes in his manifesto, 'art may be political as long as it stays away from politics.'¹⁷⁹ It is afraid of having and

177 Boris Arvatov, *Iskusstvo I Proizvodstvo* (Moscow: Proletkult, 1926), quoted in Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 25.

178 Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, 98.

179 Żmijewski, 'Applied Social Arts'.

using its power, of intervening in societal life, of actually trying to change how people think and feel – of actually supporting scientists and politicians to achieve new forms or structures of collective life.

This inhibition of art's radical potentiality can be explained, Żmijewski argues further, by the fact that artists themselves are traumatized and influenced by taboos that don't allow them to act out their actual power. The idea of an applied and effective art practice that would go beyond a mere critique protected by the realm of an autonomous art world – thus a critique from which people and institutions could shield themselves if they wanted – is burdened, Żmijewski writes, by a sense of shame and guilt. These feelings are triggered by the return of past traumatic experiences, making sure that every time an artist is about to cross the borders of what is commonly accepted (namely that art can only be political to an extent in which it does not have any direct political effect), he or she will make sure the artistic actions are not going too far. Shame and guilt therefore limit, unconsciously, today's art events so that art stops precisely at that point when it could potentially start changing our life directly – turning it into something better – something more. According to Żmijewski the traumatic experiences that have led to these feelings were the experiences made in fascist regimes as well as the experience of Socialist Realism – both phases in which artists were forced to produce works in accordance with the political interests of the party in power. The fascist and the communist experience are seen as having had similar traumatic effects on the history of modern art. In each case the political and progressive potentialities and tools inherent to the phenomenon of art, as well as art's own urge to engage more directly with non-artistic realms as had been expressed in the historical avant-garde (see below), had been eventually used, or abused, by totalitarian regimes to implement and foster violent structures, turning the artist into a collaborator or supporter of the political system in place. The *Manifesto of Applied Social Arts* and its attempt to theorize a new form of political art, on the other hand, aims to resurrect or revive art's desire for power by confronting these emotional (unconscious) realities or mechanisms that prevent artists and the art world from becoming useful, effective, and transformative.

The return of the avant-garde: Peter Bürger and Hal Foster

We thus find expressed in the critical or agorophilic art of the 1990s and the *Manifesto of Applied Social Art* a condensed artistic exploration of the relation between art and life, which evolved around questions that for the first time had been raised, as Peter Bürger has argued, by the historical

avant-garde movements of the 1910s and 20s.¹⁸⁰ Bürger's main argument is that historical avant-garde movements such as Dadaism, Surrealism, or the Russian Avant-garde were an enactment of an inevitable self-critique of bourgeois, thus modern autonomous art. This self-critique had become possible as well as necessary once art found itself completely separated and alienated from the non-artistic spheres of life. Bürger argues that by the beginning of the twentieth century bourgeois, autonomous art (in the East as well as the West) had arrived at a point at which it not only had become institutionally autonomous, which means that it worked as an institution within modern societies whose products were created by 'free' individuals who were not dependent on the interests of other societal subdomains or actors (as had been the case in pre-modern and imperialist societies), but its autonomy had also gradually extended towards the artwork's form and content, both of which were increasingly directed towards the laws and dynamics of aesthetic elements only (abstract and minimalist art). This complete detachment from the themes and symbols of everyday life, which Bürger described as the latest stage or completion of modern aesthetic paradigms, put artistic production into a position from which the only option it had to develop in a creative and artistic way was a radical self-critique of or break with its own autonomous status. Instead of rejecting former styles art had to start rejecting the institution of autonomous art itself. Art had become 'sich selbst zum Gehalt'¹⁸¹ - had become its own content – and the different avant-garde movements (Dadaism, Surrealism, Russian Avant-Garde) had put this critique of the institutional as well as formative realm of art into practice.

At the centre of the avant-garde's attack on institutionalized modern art was a critique of art's deliberate separation from other spheres of societal life captured in the concept of art's autonomy. The intention of the historical avant-garde movements was consequently to destroy the institution of art as one that was withdrawn from everyday life praxis¹⁸² and to reconnect art with non-artistic spheres of social life. This, however, did not mean to simply include more direct and realistic links to societal matters and images in an artwork's content. Rather, the aim was 'to organize through art a new life practice' / 'von der Kunst aus eine neue Lebenspraxis zu organisieren';¹⁸³ not simply creating a more realistic art, but overcoming the dualism of art and life by sublating these two contradictory spheres into a new dynamic union of life and art, so that new forms of social practice and reality could emerge. This new reality was seen as a life practice that would be aesthetic in

180 Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, 13th ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2013). Bürger developed the first comprehensive theory of the avant-garde. This was in 1970. His theory has been referred to widely but also repeatedly criticized, especially his view on the neo-avant-garde.

181 Ibid., 66.

182 Ibid., 117.

183 Ibid., 67.

itself – a new form of ‘Lebenspraxis’ that would evolve around aesthetic considerations – while art would become practical or engaged. This fusion of life and art ought not to be understood as an aesthetisation of existing life or politics, hence as an aesthetic underpinning of existing power structures – something that Benjamin had observed in relation to fascist and communist regimes – but as a creation of or approximation towards a new and better life constructed, explored, and advanced through artistic means and strategies.¹⁸⁴

After the war, these questions and forms of artistic practice characterizing the historical avant-garde returned in so-called neo-avant-garde movements. While some art theorists had criticized this return of the avant-garde as mere repetition of past styles and therefore as a cancelation of art’s paradigm of creativity and creation (Peter Bürger was one of them), others defended this return as a powerful and necessary development in the history of modern art. Art critic Hal Foster, for example, argued that the various neo-avant-garde movements, which from the 1960s onwards had repeatedly and in various ways reactualized the artistic experiments of the historical avant-garde, were necessary repetitions of crucial historical experiences made within the art scene at the beginning of the 20th century. It was only through these repetitions that the rupture, which the avant-garde movements had posed in modern understandings of art, could be comprehended.¹⁸⁵ Or to put it in other words, the historical avant-garde, which had demanded an engagement of art with life and thus a profound rethinking of the paradigms of modern art, had been so radical, in fact so traumatic, that its attempts to transform the relation between art and life had to be repeated in order to be comprehended. The ‘avant-garde’ was therefore not to be understood as one historical event, but rather as a specific type of transgression that would return – again and again. In contrast to Bürger, Foster then also stressed that the romantic rhetoric of revolutionizing art and life, used by the avant-garde, ought not to be read literally – something that, according to Foster, Bürger had done. The avant-garde, as now comprehended in its neo-avant-gardistic returns, had not aimed for an imaginary radical rupture or revolution, had not been in search of a fantasized point zero from which a new society could have

184 This means that according to Bürger and in contrast to Benjamin, the radical break by the beginning of the twentieth century that had changed the ways how art was being created as well as as what it was being perceived and understood had not mainly been a result of the technological development that had created new artistic means turning traditional ones obsolete, but was rather a development emerging from the tension that was an inherent part of the institutional frame of bourgeois art itself. The increasing gap between art and life due to which art was moving more and more away from the sphere of everyday life, had at some point to be sublated. The avant-garde and its demand for an emancipatory and utopian art practice that was situated within the sphere of everyday life was therefore a result of the continuously growing aestheticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth century and the tension caused by its alienated relation towards life.

185 Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 15.

been constructed, but its revolutionary actions were first and foremost acts of a radical, creative critique; a critique, Foster writes, which is, in art as it is in psychoanalysis, interminable.¹⁸⁶

Avant-garde art and its repetitions in neo-avant-gardistic movements mimicked society in order to mock it. It had a utopian dimension not by telling what can be done but what cannot be. Its power was hence not merely symbolic or rhetorical but contextual and performative. The art of the avant-garde was a contextual attack on 'languages, institutions, and structures of meaning, expectation, and reception' as practiced within the various art worlds in the beginning of the twentieth century,¹⁸⁷ and not a general movement advancing the reconnection of art and life per se, as Bürger's approach suggested. Its critique was there to challenge conventions not to suggest new ones. In fact, the main and common aim of the avant-garde and in its reconstruction by the neo-avant-garde, Foster writes, had been to 'sustain a tension between art and life'¹⁸⁸ and not to unify and reconcile them in a new harmonic relation; the had been not to sublimate the two in order to create a new form of aesthetic politicized praxis, one that could have a positive impact on life, or create a new and better form of collectivity, but to critique in radical, anarchic, nihilist, or later deconstructive ways institutionalized forms of life from within the sphere of art.

In this respect, the 'Critical Art' after 1989 in Poland can be seen as having reactualized this avant-gardistic demand to challenge established forms of societal practice by mocking, rejecting, or disturbing them. The *Manifesto of Applied Social Arts*, on the other hand, which could be seen as a post-communist reaction or comprehension of this reactualization of the historical avant-garde and the radical reactions it had triggered within a post-communist, transitory site, called for a further exploration or comprehension of the agitational, political, or directly interventionist power inherent in art. It called, one could maybe also say, for a more literal reading of the demands and questions raised by the historical avant-garde, and in particular by the Russian avant-garde and its belief 'that art had the power to change "life".'¹⁸⁹ When reading Źmijewski's manifesto and its demands on art to become more directly engaged with social reality, it seems as if something else in regard to the historical avant-garde and its critique of modern art practice had to be processed or understood; something that escapes the avant-garde's reactualization or repetition in today's neo-avant-garde movements as well as respective art discourses that concentrate on the critical and disruptive power of art only (such as Foster's reading of the avant-garde). When reading Źmijewski's manifesto it

186 Ibid.

187 Ibid., 16.

188 Ibid.

189 John E. Bowlit and Olga Matich, eds., *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment* (Stanford University Press, 1996), 2.

seems as if something once ‘known’ and enacted by the historical avant-garde, some kind of belief or hope in art as a medium to radically transform society, which today is buried or inhibited by the trauma of political art, still has to be comprehended, explored, or put to rest. Not only in Eastern Europe – but generally.

Artistic practice in Poland during communist times

This demand for a confrontation with or comprehension of the trauma of political art, a trauma that in Foster’s psychoanalytic reading of the repetitions of the avant-garde has been interestingly evaded or overseen, is not, I argue, a coincidence but an expression of the dilemma or crisis post-communist art engages with. The fragile and transitory post-communist site from which it speaks brings up relics of past times that break with established or coherent accounts of history. In the case of artistic practice in Poland this return of the pragmatic, political demands of the historical avant-garde and the strong mistrust of an art that remains within its autonomous, ineffective realm, is further intensified by the specific experiences made by artists during communist times. Because although art under communism meant in Poland as in other Eastern European countries a direct experience of the trauma of Socialist Realism – thus a trauma of the loss of art’s autonomy – communism in Poland had meant also a repetition of the trauma of modern, autonomous art – thus a repetition of the dead end modern art had found itself at at the beginning of the twentieth century.

After Stalin’s death and in the course of political shifts within Polish society, the communist party in Poland under the leadership of Władysław Gomułka had decided to drop the paradigms of Socialist Realism and allowed artists to practice Western, modern art. This meant that after 1956 artists in Poland were free to create and show anything they liked as long as it remained clearly separable from the political sphere. The 1958 Moscow exhibition of art was an example of this unique position of the Polish art scene. The exhibition showed recently produced art from various communist countries, but among all the countries that exhibited works it was Poland that showed a particular emphasis on modernism and aestheticism ‘which contrasted sharply with the stylistic uniformity of the rest of the exhibition’ dominated by Socialist Realism.¹⁹⁰ So while during Stalinist

190 Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 69. This privilege also meant that in that time (although this was the case up until the 1970s) selected artists were allowed to travel to Western Europe, which in turn enabled them to import ideas and material from exhibitions and workshops in the West. And it also meant that the Polish art scene served many artists in Eastern Europe as an indirect gate through which they could view and participate in movements that were linked to modernist art beyond the Iron Curtain. Poland was hence often visited by artists from other Eastern European countries. ‘During the period when Czechoslovak authorities made travel to the West virtually impossible, Poland, along with the other Central European countries (Valoch also mentions Hungary and, notably, the GDR), functioned as a connection of the former East to the international art scene.’ *Ibid.*, 244.

times art had been integrated and subjugated to the political machinery (in regards to its form, content, and institutional character) causing many artists to withdraw their work from the public realm, after 1956 art's autonomy and its modernist paradigms seemed to have been completely restored. And after the traumatic experience of the loss of art's autonomy and its 'complete dissolution in reality'¹⁹¹ most artists embraced the regained autonomy of art and the withdrawnness of modern aestheticism from reality as a strong emancipatory tool that protected creativity and art from an ideological influence by the regime.

Tadeusz Kantor's gestural paintings, theatre performances, and happenings, which relatively quickly also became popular in the West, were characteristic expressions of such experimentations with art's autonomous ontology at that time. Their specific aura separated these works from the experiences of everyday life and politics and made them useless for and immune against any ideological propaganda. And although Kantor's happenings cannot be called autonomous in a traditional, modernist sense they were still strongly characterized by their withdrawal from reality or social life. 'It was not the balance between art and life that interested Kantor', Klara Kemp-Wlech wrote, 'but something else – the production of a space where certain events and situations could have a life of their own, not as art, or as life, but as themselves.'¹⁹² The aim was thus to create a different, other space or reality, a liminal space, neither accessible to art nor to life – and thus independent from any conventions or structures of power.

Various other examples of this withdrawn 'autonomous' art practice can be found in the early work of the Foksal Gallery which was founded in 1966 and with which Kantor was affiliated. Still a product of the post-Socialist-Realist 'thaw',¹⁹³ which means a product of a time when the experience and the strict paradigms of Socialist Realism were still remembered very well but the political situation had changed in a way that it allowed for more liberal forms of artistic practice, the gallery sought to protect the use of art against the danger of its potential abuse for political purposes. 'The Living Archives', a pamphlet conceptualized and written by the gallery's curators Wiesław Burowski and Andrzej Turowski in 1971, illustrates this very well.

191 Expression used by Jarzy Ludminski quoted by Lukasz Ronduda, *Polish Art of the 1970* (Warszawa: Polski Western, 2009), 8.

192 Klara Kemp-Wlech, 'Emancipation and Daydreams: Kantor's Happenings', in *Kantor Was Here*, ed. Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius and Natalia Zarzecka (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2011), 141.

193 Artistic production in Poland during communist times was characterized by periods in which the usually strict control of the cultural sphere by the communist party was loosened. Ronduda and Zeyfang write that "'(t)haw" periods of liberty were interspersed with periods of stern governmental control, making a linear history - desired or not - impossible.' Lukasz Ronduda and Florian Zeyfang, eds., *1,2,3... Avant-Gardes: Film/Art between Experiment and Archive*, 1. Aufl. (Warsaw; Berlin; New York: Sternberg Press, 2007), 9.

In the beginning of the 1970s art critics like Hanna Ptaszowska or artists like Edward Krasinski had tried to initiate an approximation of the Foksal Gallery towards the sphere of non-artistic life, calling for artistically more active and critical forms such as those for the first time explored by the historical avant-garde movements in the 1910s and 1920s. The manifesto of the Living Archives, on the other hand, was a response to these ‘pseudo-avant-gardistic’ requests which insisted on art’s absolute autonomy. Instead of reviving the avant-garde’s demand to step beyond art’s autonomous aesthetic sphere and get engaged with non-artistic life the Living Archive demanded an even stronger separation from the latter. The manifesto presented the gallery as a space that was meant to protect the artwork from any influence that could potentially destroy its pure aesthetic ontology. It protected it not only from the political apparatus, but also withdrew the artwork like a ‘letter box’ temporarily from the influence of the artist (author/sender) as well as from that of the audience (recipient) and thus guaranteed its preservation as free object.¹⁹⁴ Instead of making thoughts, images, or symbols accessible, of showing an audience something it otherwise could not see, of communicating something it could not know, the gallery as Living Archive withdrew objects or situations from the circulation of intersubjective communication and exchange. ‘We do not present history but we keep the thoughts isolated. (...) a rich collection in the Living Archives is a necessity, but it cannot be used for any purpose. (...) We are establishing the archives that are functioning currently’ with no historical narrative pre-determining their meaning.¹⁹⁵ Instead of being a means for entering the sphere of social life art was therefore seen as something that could only exist outside of a linear temporality and current structures of signification. It was understood as creating or taking the place of a third autonomous dimension which is current and material but cannot be captured other than by its absence from what was consciously accessible – free from its known form and function. The Living Archive does not know time, does not emerge through formations of meaning, but it still contains thoughts, captured as (withdrawn) art which come from a sender and are going to arrive at a receiver, but only emerge when separated from both.

If the paradigms of Socialist Realism had dragged artistic practice away from the often abstract and intellectual avant-gardism of the classical avant-garde, turning the avant-garde’s demand for an

194 Tadeusz Kantor had already experimented with the idea of the Post Office as a liminal space in the 1960s. In 1965 he wrote that a post office was a zone in which ‘objects – letters (...) / packets, parcels, bags and all their contents / exist for a certain time / independently, / without an owner (...) / without a function / almost in a void / between the sender and the receiver / where both one and the other remain powerless (...). This is one of the rare moments, in / which the object slips away from its fate.’ Quoted in Kemp-Welch, ‘Emancipation and Daydreams: Kantor’s Happenings’, 142.

195 An image of the pamphlet can be found in Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius and Natalia Zarzecka, eds., *Kantor Was Here* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2011), 148.

aesthetic engagement with life and politics into a politically and ideologically engaged art that was committed to realist, representative works for the proletariat and completely subjugated by the ideological programme of the party, then the art of the 1960s and to some extent also that of the 1970s in Poland understood itself again as avant-gardistic precisely because of its estranged, abstract, and autonomous existence, which was seen as a guarantee for art's possibility to withdraw from and step out of dominant structures.¹⁹⁶ Paradoxically or symptomatically, however, this shift towards aesthetic autonomy, was attuned with the interests of the communist party in Poland. Art's desire for freedom was not so much a thorn in the party's flesh but fell into line with the plans and strategies of the ruling political structure. As long as artists remained committed to their aestheticism the party did not have to worry about any interventions from the art scene that would question the party's authority. The authorities in Poland were, as Piotrowski writes, 'interested in maintaining, not restricting, art's autonomy; they wished to do so in order to delegitimize political critique, which was the legacy of the avant-garde.'¹⁹⁷ So although these modern art movements managed to explore aesthetic forms that were characterized by their withdrawnness from any societal use within a political structure that was in principle opposed to anything that would develop beyond its ideological control, institutionally art practice of the post-Socialist-Realist thaw remained attuned to and dependent on the decisions and policies made by the party, with its apparent freedom having turned, as Piotrowski called it, into a 'velvet prison' created by communist authorities.¹⁹⁸

The communist party had an interest in an autonomous art scene which would abstain from any direct involvement in political matters and merely focus on its aesthetic realm. And the artists had an interest in preserving the artistic freedom they had been offered by the party after they had struggled under the extreme experience of a totally politicized art. But by simply accepting this political or institutional demand of an autonomous art and holding back from any direct political engagement at a time when the communist regime implemented repressive measures in other realms of societal life and against people who had tried to resist or oppose the regime's power, many artists in Poland had become complicit, Piotrowski argues, with the repressive regimes in the East. The autonomy of their art which was believed to resist the total control of the state and its ideology was in fact dependent on precisely this state and the party's approval of modernist forms. At the same, time the art scene's withdrawal to their protected 'letter box' environment also meant that artists had avoided the difficult ethical or even existential questions many people at that time had been faced

196 This time leaning towards a Greenbergian understanding of the avant-garde.

197 Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, 90.

198 *Ibid.*, 86.

with. So although abstraction remained for a long time the preferred art form as well as an 'attribute of artistic freedom and "modernity"'¹⁹⁹ this freedom in the form of a radical withdrawal from the political languages, images, and events characterizing the public sphere at that time demonstrated at the same time once again modern art's predisposition for being a closed, self-contained and potentially obedient, opportunistic and unfree structure – always tendentially inclined to accommodate itself within its velvet prison of an autonomous, non-political world. The trauma of a politicized art during Stalinism was thus in Poland, one could say, followed by the trauma of an autonomous art scene which had once again arrived at the dead end of modern aestheticism in a system that was not free.

Today's velvet prison and the difficult return of the pragmatic demand

Art practice in the 1970s and 1980s in Poland was characterized by a wide range of new artistic forms exploring how art could engage once again with life. This opening towards non-artistic realities was also supported by the political changes of the 1970s with many people seeing the new leader of the communist party, Edward Gierek, as a sign for a possible liberalization and democratization of the increasingly troubled structure set up by the previous Gomułka government. Existential post-essentialist artists such as Marek Konieczny, Zbigniew Warpechowski or Ewa and Andrzej Partum expressed their critique of the purified and negative art of the Foksal environment by opening art towards the mysteries, sensual, and imaginary elements of life – thus towards some kind of space between knowledge and the body. The pragmatist movement, on the other hand, crucially influenced by Oscar Hansen's concept of the Open Form, stressed that art ought to infiltrate and shape contemporary life more directly by using the structure and language that was forming this life in the respective historical moment – thus the structure and language of the communist regime. 'Moving away from categories such as neutrality and autonomy', Ronduda wrote, 'the pragmatists wanted, as far as possible, to consciously and actively participate in changes in the non-artistic reality.'²⁰⁰ Art was to become a field of social communication that would break with dominant jargons and that could, from within the current structure, open up new ways of seeing and perceiving the world and like that offer possibilities to challenge what seemed unshakable.

In the 1980s, a time characterized by radical political shifts and strong state surveillance, some artists had joined the political resistance movements of Solidarność or had started to cooperate with

199 Anda Rottenberg, *Art from Poland 1945-1996* (Warsaw: Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej Zacheta, 1997), 14.

200 Ronduda, *Polish Art of the 1970*, 13.

the church against state-sponsored organizations. Others, however, explored radical forms of artistic activism by seeking to distance themselves from both the communist establishment as well as the increasingly nationalist and catholic movement around Solidarność. Either by creating autonomous, underground spaces to emphasize once again the need for free and individual expression (The Grupa or Neue Bieremiennost), or by staging rallies or street protests, such as the happenings organized by the Orange Alternative, these art movements sought 'to disturb the balanced relationship among the state authorities, the Church, and the opposition.'²⁰¹ The public events by the Orange Alternative, for instance, ridiculed the communist status quo as well as the rituals and narratives of the opposition movement in seemingly banal or non-sensical actions such as distributing toilet paper roles²⁰² or dressing up as Santa Claus. But in the socio-political context of that time it were precisely such grotesque interventions, such non-sensical transgressions of established forms, which, as Kobialka argued, demonstrated the grotesque character of the political sphere. And in contrast to similar artistic events in the West, artists in communist countries like Poland enacted these open interventions into the political sphere without any institutional structure that would have protected them as free artists. These artistic ruptures thus functioned, as Kobialka has put it, as enactments of possible worlds. Not by offering alternative visions or forms of a different community or identity but as actions 'that constantly and relentlessly (reveal) the confusion that exists in binary powers rolled into one and the same law of political domination.'²⁰³

The socio-political rupture of 1989, which to us has become a self-evident turn in history but which in the 1980s was something that hardly anyone could have foreseen with certainty, accelerated, as I have argued in the previous chapter, the art scene's search for means and forms of artistic expression. And it was in this repeated crisis, caused by the sudden and unexpected change of the societal frame within and against which art has been developing in the last decades, that history, historical and art historical experiences, emerged in surprising and unexpected ways. With the rupture in 1989 various ghosts (unprocessed hopes and catastrophes) stirred up, among others the trauma of political art but also the trauma of an alienated autonomous art caught up in its velvet, institutional prison.

Żmijewski's claim for a more pragmatic art had provided him with the prestigious opportunity of functioning as the curator of the 7th Berlin Biennale in 2012. His call for a more directly involved form of political art thus had resonated within the international art scene in which the Berlin

201 Michal Kobialka, 'Possible Worlds of the Pomaranczowa Alternatywa', *Theatre Journal* 67, no. 4 (2015): 612.

202 The communist experience in Poland was characterized by a notorious lack of toilet paper.

203 Kobialka, 'Possible Worlds of the Pomaranczowa Alternatywa', 623.

Biennale is known as an experimental and acclaimed exhibition site. The actual realization of such applied, social art within the context of this biennale had however been surprisingly unpopular within the established art scene that remains predominantly influenced by Western European and North American art discourses and art practices (see Chapter Six). When preparing the biennale in Berlin Żmijewski wrote in 2011:

I have the feeling we've gone too far in our illusions and in the institutionalization of art. If you look at this crowd of Berlin artists, you'll see that they in fact follow the local galleries. The galleries offer a hope for the "precariat"—their sprawl encourages artists to move to Berlin. At the same time, the institutions exercise a form of "velvet censorship," operating hand-in-hand with the market.²⁰⁴

This time it was not a communist party that was benefitting from an art scene that remained within the velvet space of an autonomous arts institution, but an arts industry that exploited artists and used their work for the reproduction of existing power relations in an unprecedented manner. Art in neoliberal countries had become, whether in its autonomous, withdrawn forms or in the transgressive attempts of a contemporary art, predictable in its unpredictability. It was allowed to critique and challenge established discourses as long as it did not actually provoke change in them. It was allowed to confront us with experiences of what it meant to live a reified and alienated life without actually contributing to its dissolution. It was allowed to be radical without taking the risk of going beyond the radicality to which the new global and diverse art scene and its non-artistic environment had become accustomed.

Artistic practice as understood and experienced in the genealogy of this former communist country had created a historical sensitivity for the obedient and system-conforming character of art – of political art as well as of autonomous, modern art. Art was always at risk of being absorbed and instrumentalized by the system in place. It was always in danger of ending up in its institutionalized niche – the undialectical middle – from which no crack with established and conscious forms of thought and life could emerge. In 1962 Adorno wrote that 'this is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems politically dead.'²⁰⁵ Żmijewski's manifesto, on the other hand, in a way tells us that it might be the right time for trying to comprehend the political demands of the historical avant-garde as well as to confront the trauma of political art. The relation between art and life could or had to change once again in a

204 Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warsza, 'Universalizing the Exception. A Conversation between Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warsza', accessed 30 January 2017, <http://blog.berlinbiennale.de/en/date/2011/11>.

205 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Commitment', *New Left Review* 87–88 (1974): 89.

radical way – and this change would also have an impact on how people could live their lives collectively. We are not led in the direction of one pre-defined utopian space. But we are reminded of the possibility of change through art and at the same time confronted with it in a language or form we thought had died many years ago – and in a place far away. ‘It is not the office of art to spot alternatives,’ Adorno wrote in the essay quoted above, ‘but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men’s head.’²⁰⁶ Perhaps today, art can only be autonomous, thus resist the course of historical coercion, when it enacts and relives precisely what is thought to have mostly damaged its autonomy.

206 Ibid., 78.

1989, Poland, again: On the way back to Warsaw, in my train compartment an elderly man keeps asking confused questions of his wife, who answers him with scalding sarcasm. 'Where are we?' he asks. 'How fast is the train going? When are we going to get there?' - and each time, she chastises him without mercy.

Toward the end of the trip, he dozes off and then wakes up abruptly. 'Has the Uprising started?' he asks anxiously. 'Are we in time for the Uprising?' The Warsaw Uprising, he means. This time, his wife doesn't answer.²⁰⁷

Chapter Five

Warsaw's unthought places

On the transitory character of the post-communist site and the unbearable lack of otherness in post-communist art

In this chapter I explore and discuss two artworks as post-communist by focusing particularly on their relation to a specific type of public space which I call the 'post-communist site'. I regard the latter to be a notion that describes places in Eastern European cities that have not yet been integrated, neither symbolically nor functionally, into the new urban landscapes and structures that represent the 'Western democracies' these countries have been trying to turn into over the last three decades. But neither have these places kept the function and meaning they used to have during and prior to communist times. These places are there, but are not really seen. They form part of today's post-1989 everyday but fall weirdly out of it. Post-communist artworks, I will argue, expose us to the hidden and often unrecognized ruins and traces of past and potential future times that hover in these sites and by doing so present to us, artistically, Europe's present and past through the uncertain and transitional space of the post-communist moment.

²⁰⁷ Hoffman, *Exit into History*, 29.

Constructed collectivity and its public outdoors

It has been repeatedly argued that buildings and other urban elements are linked to collective identities, memories, and narratives all of which find symbolized expression in physical, codified urban spaces. Buildings and public sites, their architectural structure, are permeated with social meaning and each intervention, whether planned or by force, is also an intervention into the psychosocial realities attached to and reinforced by the presence of these physical sites. Robert Bevan, for example, has documented how buildings capture the continuity of successive experiences and how they possess the power to contain and materialize a group's collective identity – its ideas and feelings that bind a people together. A nation weds itself to its landscape. The destruction of cultural artefacts during wars therefore often serves as a deliberate means to dominate, terrorize, divide, or even eradicate a people or a nation altogether.²⁰⁸ According to Bevan, such symbolical violence consequently cannot be seen as a mere matter of collateral damage, but must be recognized as a willful violent act aimed at ‘enforced forgetting’²⁰⁹ that often preludes or follows the actual destruction of a community. With the destruction of public edifices, which capture aspects of a collective identity, the ‘collective’ symbolized by them, and with it its past and future, potentially ceases to exist.

At the same time, however, this entrenchment of collective identity with the material structure of cultural landscapes has also always been used to solidify and reproduce mainly dominant ideological views and registers. Solid buildings and monuments in urban designs usually express and represent those elements of existing identities that shall be strengthened or highlighted. Ambiguous, ephemeral, or uncertain relations or realities are only rarely expressed deliberately in a city’s official plan and architecture – and looming doubts that a ‘collective’ might not exist in the way it is being fantasized are cut short by the static appearance of urban designs. The wealth and superiority of a nation, for example, is symbolized in the height and design of its skyscrapers. Their material reality is not only some kind of reassurance of a common identity and its history but also an expression of power over others as well as some kind of guarantee for these power relations to continue existing in future.

So in each case, the construction and preservation of buildings, monuments, and public places is always in some way interlinked with feelings of cultural belonging – often structured through

208 Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 18.

209 Ibid.

national registers and existing power relations. But what about those elements of urban reality that contradict or escape the shapes of hegemonic identities, their fantasies and forms of collective life? Can what falls out of an intended, conscious, or tolerated collective structure also be embodied in places or buildings in or around which this life is taking place? Or to put it in other words, does what we cannot or don't want to know about contemporary common life also crop up in the physical landscapes of everyday urban life?

These are the questions that emerged from my reading of two post-communist artworks both of which were situated within the urban sphere of post-1989 Warsaw. Both artworks, Yael Bartana's ... *And Europe will be Stunned* (2012) and Joanna Rajkowska's *Oxygenator* (2007) are contemporary, open art projects that are, each in different ways, set at the in-between of artistic institutions and the public, political sphere; hence art projects which integrate elements, places, or people from everyday life into their artistic constellation (Bartana) or which introduce and place an artistic object within the public sphere (Rajkowska), insinuating themselves 'as close to the now and the here as it can get.'²¹⁰ What is striking about these two projects is that the places these artworks work with and which they, as I will discuss below, translate and transform artistically, are largely abandoned, derelict, or traumatized sites. They are places that are either dysfunctional in a way that people rarely use them or that are abandoned since the purpose they were meant to serve does not match the requirements or ideas of today's post-1989 context.

I argue that the socio-political transition process in Eastern European countries, and in Poland or Warsaw in particular, has produced various so-called post-communist sites which have not found their new positive and functional form within today's neoliberal democracies, but neither have they kept their former identities or functions. Since these countries have introduced new economic, political as well as cultural structures/languages their urban sites stopped being perceived or used in the ways they had been perceived and used previously. Vast urban restoration and redevelopment projects have started changing the architecture and with it the symbolical languages used in Warsaw's landscapes, gradually transforming the former communist capital into a flagship of today's Polish nation state. In this context it is (only) art, I argue, that has the potentiality to insinuate itself into and explore the transitional sites which have been created as unwanted byproducts of these developments. And by doing so this post-communist art confronts us with

210 Susan Buck-Morss, 'What Is Political Art?', in *InSITE97: Private Time in Public Space: San Diego, Tijuana* (San Diego: Installation Gallery, 1998), 16.

elements of today's contemporary life that usually escape our conscious ideas of who 'we' or 'they' are or who 'we' or 'they' have become.

Yael Bartana - ... And Europe will be stunned

In 2011 Yael Bartana's trilogy ... *And Europe will be Stunned* represented Poland at the Biennale in Venice. Bartana, an Israeli-Dutch artist, was the first non-Polish artist to represent the country at an international art event. But the decision by the Polish Ministry for Culture to step out of a national register when deciding which artwork should be exhibited in the Polish pavilion in Venice, was not a coincidence but an element brought forward by the artwork itself. This is because Bartana's three films are an exploration of the possibility and impossibility of national identities in the context of a post-utopian age – hence in an age in which it seems that the emancipatory and hopeful ideas of the modern era have lost the credibility and power they once had. This exploration takes place in Warsaw and develops around the idea of the so-called 'Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland' (JRMiP). The aim of this movement is to return 3.3 Million Jews to Poland in order to 'heal' the historical wounds of the Polish nation which prevent it from turning into the national collective it is trying to become. The movement was founded by Bartana but developed through the production of this trilogy at the in-between of some kind of fictitious realm of artistic imagination, on the one hand, and a real, public environment, on the other.²¹¹ The production of each of the three films involved figures from the public and was situated at various different public sites in post-1989 Warsaw, with each film capturing a different stage or development of this movement, constantly integrating and influencing elements from contemporary public life. The JRMiP and its story told in these films are thus, I argue, an artistic expression of the tensions and contrasts characterizing the post-communist sites and people, i.e. the post-communist social fabric or material, of which this artwork has been made.

The setting of Yael Bartana's first film with the title *Mary Koszmary/Nightmares* (2007) is the 10th Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw. This stadium, with a capacity to host up to 100,000 people, was built within only 9 months in the years 1954-1955 to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Polish communist state. It was designed as part of the recreational areas running along both banks of the river Wisla and made by 'utilizing the rubble carted away from the centre of the city.'²¹² At the end

211 On the Berlin Biennale in 2012 the JRMiP held its first International Congress creating a space in which its 'supporters' were able to discuss and decide on future strategies and actions of the movement. In 2013 an installation in Cologne with the title 'Wenn Ihr wollt, ist es kein Traum' (If you will, it is not a dream, Theodor Herzl), showed a documentary film of the congress held in Berlin. The movement has a logo, a website, a first publication and supporters.

212 Adolf Ciborowski, *Town Planning in Poland: 1945-1955* (Warsaw: Polonia Publishing House, 1956), 22.

of World War Two, Warsaw had turned into a ruin of a city. No other European city had been destroyed during this war as much as the Polish capital with about 85% of its buildings having been annihilated and almost 90% of its inhabitants either killed or driven out by German troops.²¹³ Formed like a crater and smoothly integrated with the river banks of the city that was in the process of being reconstructed, the 10th Anniversary Stadium, with the visionary mission to be the stadium of a different future – a stadium for the new socialist mass of people, was hence literally imbedded in the ruins left after the war. A 'Trümmerberg', rubble mountain, that was supposed to host and shape the arena for the new world to come.



Figure 4 & 5. The 10th anniversary stadium and a meteor crater.

In urgent need of restoration the stadium entered the post-1989 period itself as a ruin of a past time. While the inside of the stadium remained unused, its contiguous outside spaces were gradually taken over by what was to become the biggest black market in Europe – carrying the characteristic name 'Jarmark Europa'. The stadium had therefore developed into one of the lawless places at the margins of the growing structure of the new Polish nation state, hosting many unwanted traders, goods, and businesses that were not accepted beyond this site. During its existence as an abandoned site the grandstands inside the stadium were being taken over by a rare variety of weeds,²¹⁴ while the stadium's front was increasingly covered by the spontaneous and informal architecture of the

²¹³ Adolf Ciborowski, *Warsaw. A City Destroyed and Rebuilt* (Warsaw: Polonia Publishing House, 1964). Interestingly this exceptional degree of Warsaw's destruction is often forgotten. One reason for this might be related to the fact that its destruction had not been caused by the allies' bombings at the end of the war (like in the case of Dresden or Berlin), but was rather the result of a systematic destruction ordered by German authorities as moral punishment for the two major uprisings against German occupation – none of which had been supported by allied forces. Pijarski writes 'as a consequence of the 1939 invasion of Poland, the occupation, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1944, the city was destroyed to such an extent that it didn't seem obvious at the time whether Warsaw would remain the capital of Poland.' Krzysztof Pijarski, 'Wunderblock Warsaw: The Ruined City, Memory, and Mechanical Reproduction', *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture*, no. 4 (2013), <http://pismowidok.org/index.php/one/article/view/150>.

²¹⁴ Marek Ostrowski, Barbara Sudnik-Wojcikowska, and Halina Galera, 'To the eyes of the explorers there appeared a green isle: Botanical researchers at the stadium', in *Stadion X: a place that never was*, ed. Joanna Warsza (Warsaw: Korporacja 'Ha!art', 2008), 98–101.

slum like market, attaching to this socialist building that had survived the societal structure it had been supposed to create, the hidden and undesired realities of a capitalist market economy.

Bartana's film, shot at this place, starts with showing a young man on his way inside this stadium. The man is Sławomir Sierakowski, a critic and intellectual of today's post-1989 Poland. His walk through the dark tunnel towards the open arena is accompanied by the sound of the Polish national anthem. The lively melody fills this dark space with hope and yet it sounds or feels like an uncanny warning of what is awaiting us on the other side of the tunnel. 'Poland is not yet lost, So long as we still live', goes the first line of the anthem's lyrics. Once Sierakowski enters the stadium the music fades out. The vast space built to host and create a crowd is empty, abandoned and silent; at its centre the lonely young hero looking up at the empty stands, preparing himself for his mission/speech.

Although at the beginning of the film no one speaks it is the physical site and the way it has been captured/translated into film that speaks for itself. 'Something happened here. Something was here before. Will there ever be something new here again?' Finally it is Sierakowski who raises his voice, calling out his manifesto which contains the vision for a rebirth of a Polish nation and with it Poland as a Polish-Jewish country. For this to happen 3.3 Million Jews shall return to Poland. Without them, he shouts, Poland is lost. We were happy once you disappeared, he admits, but now we feel empty amongst ourselves and the empty place that was left behind keeps haunting 'us Poles' in the form of nightmares. 'Return to Poland', he shouts, 'to your, our country' so that we can create a society together which was previously impossible. 'Return, And we shall finally become Europeans.'



Figure 6. Stills from Yael Bartana's *Mary Koszmary* (2007).

In the English subtitles of this film the grammatical incongruence of ‘your our country’, ‘waszego naszego kraju’, has been eliminated with this sentence only appearing in its ‘corrected’ form, namely as ‘your country’ - the tension emerging from conflicting and not resolved claims of ownership evened out and transformed into a supposedly abstinent gesture of abdication. But it is precisely from this incongruence, the conflict between Sierakowski’s words and the structure or language of our time, that the ambiguous, anachronistic, and in a way utopian message of this movement slowly evolves – that the relation of ‘ours’ and ‘yours’, ‘me’ and ‘you’ or ‘subject’ and ‘other’ as it is predominantly practiced in present societal structures is profoundly challenged. After the loss of the other, the figure of the Jew who in the imaginative, moral realm of the Polish system had ‘filled the rejected space’²¹⁵ for almost a whole century, life, we hear Sierakowski saying, ceased to be possible. For it to continue the other has to return. Sierakowski urges:

With one language, we cannot speak
With one religion, we cannot listen
With one color, we cannot see
With one culture, we cannot feel
Without you, we will remain locked away in the past
With you a future will open for us.

Standing in the void stadium, solely accompanied by a small group of young patriotic scouts, Sierakowski calls out for a return of the Jewish other and hence for a return of diversity and difference based on which collectivity or collective life should be made possible. The experienced lack of the other, or the inability to experience oneself as in relation to someone or something different, the lack of a different language through which one's own could be translated, made meaningful in its particular relation to what is real, blocks or inhibits the development of a common yet multilayered time, locking and fixing people in the past – and with it in a fantasy of a whole origin. Contrary to the words of the Polish anthem whose melody was played at the beginning of Bartana's film, contemporary Poland, in the words of Sierakowski, is lost because after the disappearance of the Jewish community societal life has become impossible. What we hear in the stadium is that the murder or expulsion of almost the entire Polish-Jewish population in the past prevents the becoming of a Polish European identity today. It haunts it in nightmares and does not allow it turn into what it could become in today’s future – namely a free nation within a reunified Europe.

215 Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl* (PublicAffairs, 2007), 39.

But this utopian speech, its words, are haunted themselves – the meaning of the words raises hopes, confronts us with the urge for change but hearing them in this film makes one shudder at the same time. In the visually ravishing style of a Leni Riefenstahl propaganda film²¹⁶ the vision for a better future, of a togetherness with otherness, which the return of 3,300,000 Jews shall make possible is performed from the inside of an arena which clearly belongs to a different time. Instead of being the site for the realization of a utopian wish for a harmonic future, the stadium in its abandoned and yet historical shape fuels this bizarre yet hopeful vision with memories of the thoughtless state of mass movements during Nazism or Stalinism, when the masses were plunging into the feeling of being seduced by their leader instead of going through the process of a radical societal change. What once was built as a symbol of a radically different and better future has now taken on the shape and atmosphere of a haunted site. What used to represent, embody, the path towards the New seems now unable to escape its past.

The ambiguous temporal dynamic created through the ruin of the 10th Anniversary Stadium and its contradictory relation to the words uttered is deepened by the format in which this speech is presented. Resembling the populist style and sound of a manifesto the words are presented in a way that seems as defunct and displaced/anachronistic as the crumbling arena. A manifesto presented to a crowd that is missing, uttered in a format that, as Tom McCarthy writes, 'belongs to the early twentieth century and its atmosphere of political and aesthetic upheaval,'²¹⁷ turning doubly inoperative, dying away, unheard, in the vastness of the empty stadium. What makes us desire to think and live the future of a better life, a better common life through and in otherness, transports us simultaneously towards a past that we would prefer to have left behind. The contradictory interplay of visual and acoustic elements, captured in the artwork's form, destabilize the hopeful content and sound of the speech, transforming its absurd character into something frightful. Form and content of this artistic moment pull in contradictory directions.

In *Wall and Tower/Mur I Wieża* (2009), the second film of Bartana's trilogy, Sierakowski's vision materializes in an actual although temporary Jewish settlement in Warsaw. A group of young Israeli Jews arrives at the main square of the Warsawian borough Muranów to construct the first settlement for the desired returning Jewish community. The film and the event it captures symbolize and confront the audience as well as the local community in Muranów with the actual possibility for the

216 Characterized by the intimacy of extreme close-ups, the unexpectedness of smash cuts and the unusualness of specific camera angles.

217 Tom McCarthy, 'at "Manifesto Marathon"' (Serpentine Gallery, London, 18 October 2008); quoted in: Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'Manifestos for the Future', in *What Is Contemporary Art?*, ed. Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 63.

utopian vision of the JRMiP to be become true. And again, the public site at which the narrative of this film is taking place forms an essential part of the material processed/transformed in this work.



Figure 7. Muranow after the war and rebuilt in the 1950s. Reprinted by Ciborowski, *Warsaw: A City Destroyed and Rebuilt* (1964).

Since the nineteenth century Muranow was inhabited by Warsaw's Jewish community. During the Second World War this district was turned into a ghetto and after the ghetto uprising in 1943 was completely destroyed by German troops – its Jewish inhabitants either killed or deported to concentration camps, its buildings almost entirely ruined, leaving behind a vast desert made of rubble. After the war Muranow had thus turned into the biggest 'post-Jewish' place²¹⁸ in Warsaw if not the whole of Europe, with almost no former inhabitants left who would have been able to return to and rebuild their houses. The new residential area built between 1948 and 1955 from the rubble of the former ghetto was reinhabited by non-Jewish Poles.

Now, in Bartana's film we see the main square of this wounded place, as if history was inverted, being transformed by young Jewish men and women, all working together in an egalitarian and collective atmosphere, into a site on which something new is about to happen – a ground zero of the twenty-first century, filled by the excitement of a new beginning. These men and women, Boris Groys writes in his reading of the artwork, recall the revolutionary socialist spirit of the early 1920s.²¹⁹ Together they plant the seed of what shall develop into a different and better world.

218 Konrad Matyjaszek, 'Przestrzeń Pożydowska (Post-Jewish Space)', *Studia Litteraria et Historica* 2 (2013): 130–47.

219 Boris Groys, 'Answering a Call', accessed 22 June 2015, <http://yaelbartana.com/text/deflections-anti-mirrors>.

Amidst the grey layers of the post-communist transition in Poland a flicker of the socialist spirit of pre-war times returns. But again, with it returns the horror of history's repetition. What seems to reactualize or make us return to the utopian times before the war is not separable from the catastrophes that would follow. While in the 1920s these moments of turning the imagined/imaginary fantasy of a new world into something real and material must have felt like starting points of a coming future, in Bartana's work these moments are reactualized, revived, but their semblance looks and feels different. The time that has marked the absence of something that got missing from the present cannot be undone. Though akin in its shape, the settlement that is being built by the Jewish-Polish Renaissance Movement is not any longer, cannot be any longer, like an Israeli kibbutz or a Soviet kokholz imagined and built by Zionist and Socialist pioneers in the 1920s when the urge to change existing misery into something new was supported by fantasies and narratives of a better world in future.



Figure 8. Stills from Yael Bartana's *Mur i Wieza* (2009).

Today, in Europe at least, such fantasies, if they arise at all, are accompanied by ghostly relics from the past. Too much (unprocessed) experience, it seems, has been woven into our images and desire

for a different world. Accordingly, with every joist that is being nailed into the structure of this new settlement in Warsaw, modern dreamworlds and catastrophes emerge from it simultaneously.²²⁰ While first stunning its audience by showing how a utopian project is taking root in contemporary Warsaw, the film proceeds in painfully triggering nightmarish associations of concentration camps, gulags, or Jewish settlements in the West Bank. These are associations which we cannot repress while we are still flying through our dreamworld of collective action, desiring an uprising in utopian collectivity. The reactualization of a collective utopian desire for a radically different form of society, a society that can only exist through the experience of otherness, painfully merges with the experienced history of the need to control and if necessary destroy the other.

So while the first film confronts us with the necessity for rethinking and changing the way national identity or collective life within contemporary societal structures is lived today, the second film visualizes the difficulties arising in regards to the forms of collective action that are at our disposal in today's post-1989 environment. In that sense, *Wall and Tower* not only shows us the impossibility of returns when imagined as 'final redemptive destinations,' as Jacqueline Rose has argued in her reading of Bartana's trilogy,²²¹ but also reminds us, by echoing the failures of past communist or Zionist projects, of the difficulty or impossibility of new beginnings, when imagined as a clear cut with a past they are meant to supersede.

The rising tension of the historical deadlock, the feeling that we can neither put steps forward nor backward, that this artwork opens up increases in the third film of the trilogy, *Assassination/Zamach* (2011). Situated first inside Warsaw's only Stalinist building, the famous Palace of Culture and Science, and later at one of the central squares in Warsaw, Piłsudski Square, the film stages and documents a public funeral at which a diverse crowd of people has come to mourn Sierakowski, the leader of the movement. In her oration speech his imaginary wife describes how her husband got assassinated by a Polish nationalist when looking in a gallery in Warsaw at a picture of Bruno Schulz. Again we see various historical settings overlapping each other. When facing the portrait of the Polish-Jewish writer, who was shot and killed in 1942 while walking through the Drohobycz Ghetto in what is today's Ukraine, Sierakowski, the symbol and leading figure of a post-communist movement that aims at returning 3.3 Million Jews to Poland, is being killed himself. In the wish to return Jews, the fantasized other, to Poland, the Pole himself becomes vulnerable. At the same time a slide at the beginning of the film informs the viewer that an Israeli

220 Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*.

221 Jacqueline Rose, *Women in Dark Times* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 232–33.

peace activist (Juliano Mer-Khamis) was killed in the West Bank during the shooting of *Zamach*. The death of the imaginary leader who symbolizes a need or desire for the return of Jewish life, the life of the other to the place at which it got destroyed, is hence constructed as a result of the continuing racial violence in today's world – and specifically in today's Israel. And the uncanny and defunct movement of hope that had been called out within the abandoned site of the 10th Anniversary Stadium gets increasingly tangled up in past and present violence the closer it moves towards spaces of today's everyday life.



Figure 9. Stills from Yael Bartana's *Zamach* (2011).

Bartana's trilogy has to be understood and 'read' in relation to the socio-historical context it has been placed in, namely post-1989 Poland as embodied in the urban landscapes and life of its capital. Accordingly many critics and academics have analyzed how this artwork actualizes and intervenes in the contemporary status quo of Polish-Jewish relations.²²² But although this artwork is strongly intertwined with this specific geopolitical site its meaning or its artistic effect/potentiality is not restricted to this context. Rather, I argue, it is because of Poland's transitional phase, the uncertain and transitory process this country, its sites and people, have been going through, that elements of a

²²² Joanna Mytkowska, 'Return of the Stranger', accessed 22 June 2015, <http://yaelbartana.com/text/continuing-to-think>; Uilleam Blacker, 'Spatial Dialogues and the Memory of Absent Jews in Contemporary Polish Art: Yael Bartana, Rafal Betlejewski and Joanna Rajkowska', *Open Arts Journal*, no. 3 (Summer 2014); Hilary Sclodnick, 'Yael Bartana and Post-Traumatic Culture: Utopian Reversibility and the Case of Polish National Melancholia', *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 11, no. 1 (2012).

broader European reality emerge, which are otherwise and elsewhere in Europe not seen or which are usually overlooked. The post-communist, transitory state Eastern Europe and here Poland in particular are going through, contains or exposes some kind of ‘knowledge’ about Europe more generally that has otherwise become unreachable. And as this particular artwork shows, these psychosocial elements/relics or specters gathering in post-communist sites are not solely linked to the communist experience – they do not belong to one time and one historical episode only. Instead, they become sites for explorations and expressions of various sensual collective experiences all of them cropping up simultaneously. No element of the communist time exists without being loaded with and shaped by the overwhelming violence experienced during the war; no modern utopia without the catastrophes alongside or against which the former had been developed. In this sense, the post-communist condition brings up not only experiences from the communist past as an ideologically and historically clearly identifiable episode, but becomes at the same time a reactualization of Europe’s pre- and post-war years. What we encounter in the uncanny corners of these post-communist places, mediated by their translation in Bartana’s art, is hence, to put it starkly, a compressed thought-image of the tragedy of modern life as it has taken shape in Europe – a thought or artistic dream-image of the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* – confronting or reminding us of the emancipatory power of modern, Western thought and life while simultaneously dragging us through the violence and destruction it has caused.

Before World War Two around 3.3 Jews (between 10% and 13% of the Polish population)²²³ were living in Poland with Poland having become one of ‘the most important centers of Jewish life in the world.’²²⁴ Building on a history of relative legal protection, the Jewish community in Poland was one that was present, pulsing, politically organized, and diverse during interwar years. It was not only a fantasized other at the midst of a Polish people but, as Eva Hoffman wrote, it ‘comprised a genuine ethnic minority, with its own rights, problems, and powers.’²²⁵ In many regions Poles and Jews had been living alongside each other for many centuries, but their material realities, their roles within the economic structure, their cultural rites, practical loyalties, and political alignments had developed in very different ways. ‘(I)nterwar Poland served as the laboratory for the crucial testing of the various modern Jewish approaches to the Jewish question. Never before had conditions been so favorable for the flourishing of national Jewish politics and culture in the diaspora, and it is safe to say that they never will be again,’ writes Ezra Mendelsohn in his study on *The Jews of East*

223 Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, ‘Extermination of the Polish Jews in the Years 1939-1945’, n.d., <https://www.phdn.org/archives/www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/genocide/gcpol5.htm>; Jan T. Gross, *Neighbours: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (London: Arrow, 2003), 8.

224 Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 8.

225 *Ibid.*, 9.

*Central Europe between the World Wars.*²²⁶ During the Second World War six million Poles were killed – half of them were Jewish. Of the 3.3 Million Jews who had lived in Poland before the war only around 300.000 (less than 10%) survived. Many of those who survived were killed or attacked by their Polish neighbors after Poland's liberation from Nazi occupation and further thousands were expelled from the country in antisemitic campaigns in the 1950s and 60s.²²⁷

The long story of Polish-Jewish coexistence, which had started to develop around the 12th century and which, as Eva Hoffman has put it, could be seen as 'a long experiment in multiculturalism *avant la lettre*'²²⁸ - an experiment that today's Europe has been trying to repeat – had violently and abruptly come to an end when after World War Two almost the entire Jewish population in Poland had been either murdered or expelled. Although the concentration camps built on Polish territory and the genocide of European Jews had been a product of Nazi Germany, Poles living under Nazi or Soviet occupation as well as after the war contributed to a significant extent to the destruction of European Jewry.²²⁹ Despite the legal privileges, which compared to other European countries had protected the Jewish community in Poland over various periods of Poland's existence as a sovereign state, an antisemitic hatred of Jews had always been part of Polish reality. Many Poles had thus tolerated the mass murder of Jews that was often taking place right in front of their door steps; some even found open satisfaction in these developments.²³⁰ In several cases pogroms or massacres on Jews had also been realized by Poles themselves without any orders or pressures enacted by German authorities. This was especially the case in the summer of 1941 when German troops gained power over Polish territories in the East which had been previously occupied by the Soviet army. In that moment, instead of opposing the strong Germans, as Andrzej Zbikowski wrote in his

226 Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 81.

227 Dariusz Stola, *Kampania Antysyjonistyczna W Polsce 1967-1968* (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2000).

228 Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 9.

229 Recent historiographic research on the Holocaust has argued that the 'Final Solution' was something that developed gradually and was a result of various, unforeseen, and often local factors. It was not, as often believed, a meta-idea that was centrally organized and eventually realized. See, for example: Tom Lawson, 'Review of The Destruction of the European Jews, (Review No. 394)', *Reviews in History*, n.d., <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/394>. In this respect the local antisemitism of Polish people can be seen as one of a range of factors that contributed to the actual extent and form of the extermination of Jews by Nazi Germany.

230 Lanzman's *Shoa* has become one of the most famous documents that captures this part of Polish reality – a documentary which shows Polish eyewitnesses who knew about the Holocaust and partly also seemed to have accepted if not even approved it. *Shoa* has, however, also been criticized for showing only one side of a more complex reality. It did for example not mention the extent to which many Poles had helped Jewish citizens while putting their own lives at risk – and by doing so it created a one-dimensional and exotic image of the Holocaust that to its Western audience was presented as something that could only happen in the rural and barbarian East. Gillian Rose, e.g., criticized how the spectator is let off the hook by Lanzman's documentary, since he/she is left with judging other's failures instead of having to confront his/her own complicity in what remains after the Holocaust. Gillian Rose, 'Beginnings of the Day: Fascism and Representation', in *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

article on anti-Jewish pogroms in Northeastern Poland, many Poles focused instead on destroying defenseless Jews.²³¹ According to Zbikowski there had been violent attacks against Jews in twenty-nine localities with the massacre in Jedwabne, in which around 400 Jews of all ages had been killed by their Polish neighbors having been the most drastic manifestation of the antisemitic sentiments and actions characterizing many Polish communities at that time.²³² The Kielce pogrom of 1946 in which 42 Jews were killed by a mob made up of Polish workers, soldiers, and policemen, and passively supported by a huge group of local bystanders, was the biggest anti-Jewish pogrom after the war and part of a wider series of anti-Jewish violence committed by Poles when all German occupiers had long ago left.²³³ At the same time, many Jews had survived the war only due to the fact that they were offered a hiding place in Polish houses – but even those Poles who had assisted Jews, putting their own lives at risk, implored those who had survived not to tell anyone in Poland with whom they had stayed. In some cases Polish saviors of Jews had been murdered by their own compatriots after the end of the war.

As in many other European countries, Poles' involvement in and responsibility for the destruction of European Jewry had been silenced for decades after the war. But contrary to other Western European countries the repression of this dark element of national history went along with the repression of Poland's unparalleled role as a victim of the Second World War. Having been occupied by Nazi-Germany and the Soviet Union from 1939 onwards the war between these two powers was fought on Polish territory, causing in Poland a demographic catastrophe without precedent. Of the six million Poles who had died during the war, which was the highest percentage of deaths in relation to a country's population in Europe, almost all had been civilians – with half of them having been Jewish. Under communist rule neither the narrative of the Poles' suffering under Soviet troops nor any self-critical confrontation with problematic aspects of Eastern European complicity in the Holocaust were deemed of public interest and hence only rarely present in official narratives.

Today, in post-1989 Poland both contradictory narratives, the one of Poland's role as Europe's martyr as well as the history of the mass murder and mass expulsion of Jews by Poles, emerge more

231 Andrzej Zbikowski, 'Pogroms in Northeastern Poland - Spontaneous Reactions and German Instigations', in *Shared History - Divided Memory. Jews and Others in Soviet-Occupied Poland, 1939-1941*, vol. V, Leibziger Beiträge Zur Jüdischen Geschichte Und Kultur (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2007), 350.

232 Gross, *Neighbours*; Jeffrey S. Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg, 'Deadly Communities: Local Political Milieus and the Persecution of Jews in Occupied Poland', *Comparative Political Studies*, 11 October 2010, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0010414010384370>.

233 Jan T. Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz. An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006).

often as part of public discourses that aim at reestablishing and formulating a renewed national identity and history. But while the former narrative has gained overwhelming popularity and attention within the Polish public, the latter has often encountered continuing denial and resistance. In this context, Polish self-critique has not always been the result of voluntary attempts by today's Polish society to confront itself with the problematic aspects of its recent history but seems to have more often been triggered as a development forced upon the Polish public through European discourses and their current imperative to confront the history of the Holocaust as a European problem.²³⁴ Also, the remapping and rewriting of landscapes in post-communist Poland brought up, again often inadvertently or unexpectedly, the difficult question of 'post-Jewish' space or property, which since the end of the war had been kept in the dark. After the war many places in Poland which had previously been occupied and belonged to Jews were left empty or had been destroyed. Most of their owners had died and those who had managed to survive the Holocaust were not in the position to reclaim their property. They had either not been given the right or they did not have the strength to fight for it. 'Post-Jewish places', those shattered places left after the disappearance of the Jewish community in Europe,²³⁵ were hence physical embodiments of the gaps left in European culture after the war – but in no European country were these gaps as big as in Poland. After the war almost all of them were inhabited, occupied, and appropriated by Poles.

By the end of the 1990s the Italian Jewish historian Diana Pinto presented a controversial proposal for a rebirth of a European Jewish identity – foreshadowing Bartana's artistic imagination of a return of Jews to Europe.²³⁶ Pinto's idea was to create so called 'Jewish spaces' in Europe where descendants of victims of the Holocaust would live alongside descendants of former perpetrators or bystanders and where the Holocaust would become a bridge between non-Jews and Jews instead of remaining the abyss it has been for the last seven decades. A 'reunified Europe' and the increased readiness of Europe's nations to confront the history of the Holocaust contained implicitly the possibility of a revival of Jewish life in Europe – the possibility of a Jewish space that was formed through the dialogue of Jews and non-Jews; a virtual space that did not seek to repress the history of the Holocaust but which would turn this common trauma into one of the central unifying, although not less painful elements, of today's post-war Europe.

234 See for example: Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (Routledge, 2007).

235 Michael Meng, *Shattered Spaces: Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Harvard University Press, 2011).

236 Diana Pinto, *The Third Pillar? Toward a European Jewish Identity* (Budapest: Central European University, 1999).

Poland with its ambiguous history of having been the European country with the biggest and most thriving Jewish community while at the same time having also been the country on whose territory the genocide of Jews had taken place, took on, naturally, in this context a specific and ‘exceptional place.’²³⁷ Although the last two decades have seen an increase in the awareness of the Holocaust within the public sphere as well as a slow though consistent revival of Polish-Jewish relations, a dialogue and a creation of ‘Jewish spaces’ as envisioned by Pinto has never been realized. Rather, the ‘Jewish spaces’ created today in Poland are only rarely, as Matyjaszek has stressed, inhabited or shaped by Jews or by a dialogue between Jews and non-Jews. Although most ‘post-Jewish’ sites in Polish cities have stopped being the grey or silenced corners they used to be, corners whose history could not be told since it would have brought up painful and unwanted questions about missing Jewish neighbors once living in these places, their rediscovered Jewish identity remains often one which still lacks the actual presence of Jews, not to mention a mutual dialogue between Jews and non-Jews. In most cases these post-Jewish sites have been revived as tourist attractions, now carrying the title of ‘former Jewish areas’ - ‘the pride of each city and the source of its income’/‘dume miast i źródło ich dochodu.’²³⁸

In this context it is important to highlight the impact the destruction of the Jewish community in Poland has had on the development and design of space after the war. The space previously occupied by the Jewish community, hence by the ‘other’ of Poland’s Catholic and national majority, was taken over by those who had survived the war and who were allowed to stay – which apart from some exceptions was the Polish Catholic majority. The gaps left after the war were not kept vacant or untouched but were appropriated mostly by Poles in the course of the restoration of Poland as a nation within the communist East. Today, the possibility of the returning Jew, the possibility of the return of otherness or strangeness, thus holds the danger of a potential loss of the certainty and completeness with which national identities and their appertaining codified spaces have been imagined or lived in the decades after the war – not only in Poland but in all European countries that lost their Jewish communities. But in no other European country, at no other time, I argue, can this be sensed more strongly than in post-communist Poland. Any sign of a potential return of ‘the Jew’ – the Jew as the figure of the ‘other,’ the foreigner or today the refugee – means a potential confrontation with the risk of having to surrender the control and space that many Poles had hoped would be returned to the Christian, national subject after the liberation from communist rule.

237 Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 2.

238 Matyjaszek, ‘Przestrzeń Pożydowska (Post-Jewish Space)’, 132.

The Christian, national subject in modern societies is constructed around the ideas of unity, harmony, continuity, and colonial control. After the end of World War Two the figure that had so far represented what potentially could threaten this Christian subject, Europe's Jewish communities, had been literally destroyed, while the space that this 'other' community had occupied before the war, physically but also culturally, had been appropriated by national, Christian communities. The resistance to accommodate or create space for otherness that we observe in today's Poland, can be then seen as an intensified and abrupt expression of the increased incapability of Europe's nations to confront cultural otherness since it had been destroyed in the course of the last major war between Europe's nations.

Bartana's trilogy ... *And Europe will be Stunned* picks up this unconscious fear haunting the continent. A fear of the return of the other is not an exclusive issue of Poland or of Eastern European countries, as it has often been presented in the course of the continuing refugee crisis in Europe. But this fear is simply more present in post-communist countries, and in particular in Poland – on the one hand because of the transitional and uncertain phase this country is going through and hence the lack of established structures (including its urban design and infrastructure) that could keep unwanted feelings and desires at bay; on the other hand, because of the bigger gap in Poland's culture and historical narrative that had to be covered and silenced after the war.²³⁹

Bartana's trilogy, situated at post-communist places in Warsaw, picks up the present relics of the insurmountable trauma that has been caused by the Holocaust and confronts us with an artistic translation of this reality not in order to understand the difficulties of remembering Auschwitz, not to make us feel heard or to make us listen, but to stun Europe – to allow for a confrontation with what otherwise cannot be said, or to put it in psychoanalytic terms, to open a gap from which the unconscious as 'headless pieces of knowledge, disruptive eruptions of meaninglessness against the comfortable backdrop of established reason'²⁴⁰ can emerge.²⁴¹ Europe will be stunned, because it will have to face or sense itself in a light or position from which it constantly and in different ways

239 And in this sense, Israel can be seen as representing the inverted reality of the one we find in Poland. While the Polish, European subject has to repress how it occupied the 'freed' space that was left after it had destroyed the Jewish other, the Israeli subject, on the other hand, in its quest to found and defend a Jewish nation state, has to repress how it had to create the space it was not granted in Europe by expelling the Palestinian people from their territories. Or as Isaac Deutscher said in the non-Jewish Jew: 'the decay of bourgeois Europe has compelled the Jew to embrace the nation-state. This is the paradoxical consummation of the Jewish tragedy.' Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew. And Other Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 40.

240 Dany Nobus and Malcom Quinn, *Knowing Nothing, Staying Stupid - Elements for a Psychoanalytic Epistemology* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 4.

241 The analysand's 'experience of being stunned' is for Simon Bayly and Lisa Baraitser the aim or goal of a Lacanian analysis. Simon Bayly and Lisa Baraitser, 'On Waiting for Something to Happen', *Subjectivity* 24 (2008): 348.

tries to escape. It will be stunned by the experienced need to free space for otherness in sites that have been colonized by the hegemonic crowd after the war. But Europe will be also stunned, because it will be confronted not only with the knowledge of pain and destruction its modern societies have caused and continue causing but also with a simultaneous and seemingly contradictory reminder of the need to overcome, sublimate, or uplift the dynamics that have led to it – a reminder of the need and hope for change. ‘Without you, we will remain locked away in the past,’ Sierakowski calls out in the void stadium of socialist times. ‘With you a future will open for us.’

In her book *Strangers to Ourselves* Julia Kristeva raised the question of whether a society without foreigners was possible. Against the dominant trend in modern societies to reduce foreignness by integrating and unifying people under common values and identities (a tendency that took its most drastic and violent expression in fascist ideologies and practices),²⁴² her account was a passionate defense of the stranger. Strangeness, which she conceptualized not only as a profound/universal element/reality between people and bodies but also and primarily as a reality at the centre of each psyche, had to be embraced rather than eliminated. ... *And Europe will be Stunned* confronts this existential, although historically specific and contemporary, question of the role and possibility of strangeness in European society and reacts to it by calling out for a return of the stranger or strangeness who or which since the war has not been able or has not been allowed to return.

In that sense, ghostly relics of repressed experiences return in Bartana's films, but rather than emerging from one traumatic event that is re-actualized in its overwhelming force and brought through artistic means to daylight, allowing for a therapeutic understanding of the reminiscent free-floating affects, the return of the repressed leans towards becoming a traumatic event itself. The utopian, socialist desire for a new social order had to be officially written off when Eastern European countries had entered 'Western normality' as a protection against Russian or 'communist' influence.²⁴³ In Bartana's artistic adaptation of post-communist sites in Poland it reemerges in a contradictory interplay with the unlaidd ghostly relics of the trauma of the Holocaust and the continuing antisemitism enacted by Poles/Europeans in its aftermath. This specific return of a utopian desire impedes any melancholic introjection of the revolutionary pre-war spirit but neither does it really allow for, I argue, 'a fresh discussion of the future,'²⁴⁴ as was suggested by Joanna Mytkowska, since the idea of future as we know it and the anxiety of the stranger/other seem to

242 The German Home Secretary has just recently published his personal account of a German 'Leitkultur'/core culture which he regards as the basis for a successful social life in Germany. Those foreigners who want to live in Germany have to adjust to these German principles.

243 Groys, 'Answering a Call'.

244 Mytkowska, 'Return of the Stranger'.

have been fused into one frightening ghostly site. What the accompanying catalogue of the trilogy's exhibition on the Venice Biennale presents 'as an experimental form of collective psychotherapy, through which national demons are stirred, and dragged out into daylight'²⁴⁵ plunges us into the obscure realm of contradictory feelings; not resolving these into something new or harmonious but dragging us even further towards the dark unknown and yet uncannily familiar. But it is precisely this place of no return and no way out, as actualized in Bartana's films, and which I see as Bartana's translation and visualization of the post-communist site, that forces us to step out of present and ritualized forms of thought and towards other forms of relating to strangeness; forms which we cannot know or accept as part of us yet. By internalizing the dystopian deadlock of the crisis of modern societies as it crops up in post-communist sites, this artwork, I argue, allows for a different kind of utopian thought.

In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno corrected his previous statement, for which he had been criticized by many and in which he claimed that poetry after Auschwitz was impossible. But the corrected version he offered was even more drastic and difficult to cope with. 'It might have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living (...) survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz.'²⁴⁶ Bartana's trilogy is an artwork, i.e. an artistic outcry of insurmountable pain as well as an expression of a relentless although burdened desire for life, that seems to confront us with this existential question in a time when the event of the Holocaust has become for many an episode of the past – a past that has been sufficiently if not overwhelmingly understood and processed. Suddenly, in a moment when the majority of people seemed to be expecting the creation of something new and better, the transitional places in post-communist Europe/Warsaw opened up towards forgotten spheres of society's sensual tissue, showing us the state of today's nation in the form of its burdened, dysfunctional, and abandoned sites. These post-communist sites turned into physical although often 'unseen/avoided' embodiments of a reactualized existential crisis confronting today's Polish/ European public with the question of whether modern life, which had allowed for or even provoked the total destruction of otherness, was livable at all. But it is not just 'simply' a return of a past although continuing crisis. Today, as it emerges in these post-communist sites, this existential question is simultaneously tangled up with the experiential relics of the possibility and ambiguous if not violent reality of a different, communist, or Zionist structure – none of which, once realized in

245 Sebastian Chichocki and Galit Eilat editor, eds., *A Cookbook for Political Imagination* (Warsaw: Zachęta National Gallery of Art ; Berlin, 2011), 4.

246 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 362–63.

material societal space, had been able to keep the promises it had risen in its fantasized images. Instead of leaving the abandoned, avoided, or defunct places of post-communist Warsaw that brought up these unknown and dark elements of contemporary Europe 'out of sight', Bartana's trilogy captures the multi-layered experiences of past and future times as they emerge in these sites and translates them into an artistic form – not allowing us to leave the contradictory and painful realm of modernity's dilemma.

So are we hence left without alternative? Without a future that could be better than what we know? Not quite so. Jacqueline Rose writes, by referring to Lacan's concept of the future anterior (future perfect), that Bartana's artwork is characterized by a futurity which is 'neither simply backwardlooking nor forwardlooking, but that gathers shards of the past as it moves forward in time.' This, for Lacan, is the time of analysis, in which the psyche and its relation to the world around and inside of it embarks repeatedly onto a journey of change; not in order to see 'what I was and I am no more (which would be a process of repression), nor shall it be a process of finding out what I still am in what I was (repetition), but what I will have been in the process of what I am becoming.'²⁴⁷ 'Wo Es war, soll Ich werden' - the fleeting moments of (Lacanian) subjectivity thus depend on confrontations with the past, but this confrontation is not something that can be once and for all completed; the past is not an entity that could be worked through as something that either is not any longer or that always will be the same. Instead, we can become someone else in the process of finding out about those aspects of our history that escape our knowledge of who we are today or of who we think we have been in the past. Our future thus emerges not when we manage to control or colonize our past – either through repression, repetition, or identification; but it emerges in those moments when we encounter who we have been or are as something strange or other – when we 'erkennen', 'come to know', or experience a familiar and known reality beyond our ability to actually know it while taking on responsibility for this otherness within us instead of projecting it onto others.

These are moments of disillusion, hence moments of a crisis of a person's ideas of the world and his or her relation to it. However, they are also moments, as Rose stresses, full of creativity and change.²⁴⁸ The spatio-temporal experience characterizing this artwork, if we develop Rose's ideas further, is therefore one that does not seek for the arrival at a new, progressive, and fixed state or subjectivity in future – nor does it aim for a finite replacement of a wrong illusion by a corrected

247 Jacqueline Rose, 'History Is a Nightmare', accessed 22 June 2015, <http://yaelbartana.com/text/continuing-to-think-about-minimalism-1>.

248 Referring to Winnicott's theory of the transitional object.

image, but instead performs a recurring and ambiguous encounter with the experience of stepping out of false or reified identity and into crisis. And it is this complex and difficult temporality along which the political journey of the Jewish Renaissance Movement evolves. It does not campaign to take back control and to reestablish a fantasized former 'Ich', nor does it urge to move on to create a new 'Ich', but it initiates a gradual and painful formation of a future identity (Ich) in the process of exploring what escapes identity – again and again (Es) – and as such the JRMiP is hugely political – although it cannot exist within the political sphere. It mimics social movements not in order to express what they are or could become, but in order to create a space for exploring what they have been in the process of becoming already something else.

Consequently, it is through the abandoned and avoided sites of our collective life and their 'knowledge' of the ephemeral and fragile existence of all identity that we come in touch with a future and a society that could be actually different. This is a future in becoming that cannot evolve when we stay within official, discursive structures and which does not have its allocated place within the dynamics and infrastructures of today's collective societal life. It is instead a future which emerges only when what seems stable and familiar is plunged into crisis.

Joanna Rajkowska – Oxygenator

Another artwork that was created as an artistic intervention into the public space in Warsaw after 1989 was Rajkowska's *Oxygenator* (2007). Joanna Rajkowska is a contemporary Polish artist who, like Bartana, works with elements, sites, and people from the public but in contrast to Bartana's piece discussed above, her artworks are usually not only developed and conceptualized in close relation to the public sphere but are also situated as site-specific artistic objects in the material and institutional context of that space. They unfold as artistic events from within the scenes and encounters created between the objects introduced into the public space and the people using or reacting to these objects. Entering with her artistic practice as well as reshaping through the artistic objects the public sphere, means to her, as she writes in the introduction of her recent book, 'an entry into the post-communist realm, thoroughly politicized and deeply traumatized.'²⁴⁹ What then makes her work 'post-communist' is, she continues, an awareness of historical trauma and wounds of past experiences in the public 'urban tissue' with her work aiming at 'lifting spells', 'conjuring specters', 'blurring existing identities and creating new problems to deal with through new or unusual lines of division.'²⁵⁰ She writes:

249 Joanna Rajkowska, *Where the Beast Is Buried* (London: Zero Books, 2013), 1.

250 Rajkowska, *Where the Beast Is Buried*.

Coming from a historically traumatized area I know that the world is not a complicated mechanism that can be fixed, it is not architecture which can be rebuilt, the world is a monster. Unpredictable in its actions and beyond comprehension.²⁵¹

While many parents spend significant efforts to convince their children that the monsters they are afraid of do not exist, Rajkowska's art and with it its entry to the post-communist realm seems to aim precisely at confronting this monstrous reality or the fear of reality (Real) which crops up in transitional moments when old structures don't work anymore while new ones have not yet been made available. However, by recognizing this fear and by working with the societal fabric/tissue of burdened places Rajkowska's projects do not primarily, as she stresses, aim at showing how things are but rather seek towards an exploration 'of how they could be.'²⁵² The tension between an acknowledgement of the monstrous and violent character of human life and her simultaneous insistence on the idea that it could be otherwise, is hence at the centre of Rajkowska's artistic work.

Her project *Oxygenator* (2007) evolved this utopian element through the exploration of historical and collective traumata in form of an oxygen-producing pond that she installed at the centre of Grzybowski Square in Warsaw. Grzybowski Square is a place which belonged to the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw before the war and which today borders upon a series of residential buildings that used to house Jewish families. These houses are among the very few former Jewish houses in Warsaw that were not destroyed during the war. Today they are surrounded by an architectonic mix of edifices belonging to different times and different ideologies. A Catholic church faces the building of the Jewish Theatre behind which is situated the only synagogue that survived/outlived the war. On the other side of the square soar contemporary glassy office towers opposite of which stand residential blocks that were built in the 1970s during communist times. Although not situated directly by the square Stalin's Palace of Culture and Science can be clearly seen from it, towering admonishingly above the Catholic church.

251 Ibid., 1.

252 Ibid., 39.

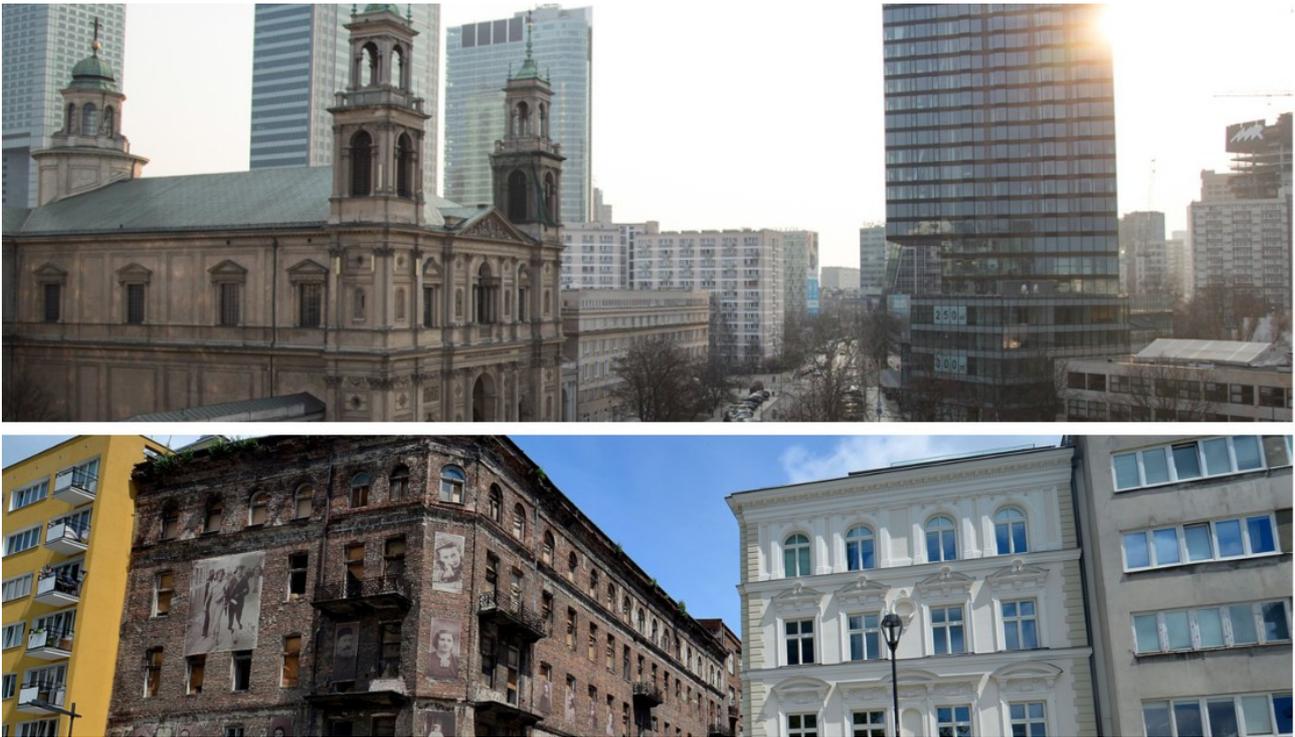


Figure 10. The different fronts and buildings around Grzybowski Square.

Various times and epochs are embodied in the buildings of this square simultaneously since its constellation was not a product of a linear historical development but has found its current shape due to repeated ruptures and catastrophes in history that have cut short the life of some communities while new phases or epochs have been started off by others. This idiosyncratic space thus resists any linear sense of historical time and does also not allow any cultural group to recognize in its manifest and historical buildings the feelings and ideas that would bind it into one collective. Grzybowski Square in that sense is not or cannot be what is usually known as cultural heritage. In Rajkowska's view Grzybowski Square is instead a haunted place. It is 'cursed' by the unprocessed history of the destruction of the Jewish community once living here as well as by the invisible presence of those communities who have settled in its surroundings but seem otherwise not to belong to this place (like for example Warsaw's Vietnamese community). Grzybowski Square is a place in Warsaw that people have learned to avoid and it accommodates mainly people or stories that fall out of existing identity structures characterizing today's Polish capital. When preparing the concept for her installation the artist observed how Israeli tourist groups were one of the few groups that visited this place regularly and deliberately. However, when visiting the square these groups

seemed to enter straight into its past time, not being able to see or remain within the here and now but were dragged immediately towards the ‘there’, ‘as if the Shoah never ended.’²⁵³

These specific aspects characterizing this place, i.e. the material relics of the Jewish ghetto, the mix of religious and cultural ideologies represented in the buildings surrounding it as well as the ongoing conflicts between these ideological realities, resulted in a public space that according to Rajkowska was ‘so oddly derelict, so abandoned, that it seemed to some degree invisible.’²⁵⁴ Invisible not because it could not be seen or found – the square is in fact in the middle of Warsaw’s city centre – but rather in the sense that its physical presence was associated with realities of contemporary life in the Polish capital that people did not want to see or could not confront. Although materially present Grzybowski Square had therefore turned into a space that was falling out of the conscious maps and routines of Warsaw’s everyday life. ‘The people themselves say that nothing was ever there,’ Rajkowska writes.²⁵⁵

Before *Oxygenator* was installed Warsaw’s city authorities had planned to ‘revive’ this square by erecting at its centre a monument that would commemorate the massacres of Poles in Volyn (Wolyn)²⁵⁶ while turning the then abandoned buildings which once used to accommodate Jewish families into hotels. Contrary to these official plans, and in collaboration with local art’s institutes, Rajkowska suggested to install an oxygen-producing pond aimed at changing the square’s current abandoned state by the spontaneous and silent presence of local residents. What this square needed was not a new identity or a new narrative that would commemorate a specific event in the past – and even less so a monument commemorating the murder of Poles during World War Two at a place that was highly associated with the extermination of Poland’s Jewish community. What it needed was a confrontation and engagement with the spectral/ghostly reality of this urban site that could only be realized by the physical presence of people countering the fact of their usual absence or avoidance of this symbolical place. Or to put it differently, being physically present at a site that was associated with relics of collective memory that could not be faced, would allow for a change in how the trauma of the Holocaust was usually dealt with – not through conscious channels but through embodied forms of collective knowledge and memory.

253 Ibid., 42.

254 Ibid.

255 Ibid.

256 The massacres that were part of an ethnic cleansing operation in Nazi-occupied Poland and that were carried out by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army between 1943 and 1944, in which approximately between 35.000 – 60.000 Poles, mostly women and children, were killed.

The starting point of this project was the idea or image of digging a hole as ‘a breathing pit in the earth.’²⁵⁷ Working physically with the burdened site, digging up its underlying and forgotten or repressed pasts and then filling the square and its urban, societal tissue (symbolically and actually) with oxygen and physical, human presence²⁵⁸ as in contrast to its current abandoned or repressed state – thus not only exploring its monstrous and dark reality (what was lying beneath) but also what was excluded from it (the material of oxygen breathing water and living bodies) – was to initiate/trigger an artistic transformation of this public square and with it the psychosocial reality it was usually characterized by. A burdened site that prevented people from forming a ‘Jewish site’ (Diana Pinto) in which individuals would come together as descendants of victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust, or as Catholics and Jews, ought to be approached and transformed by filling it with universal material such as oxygen and living bodies.

This transformation of a public site which embodied in its architectural constellation the various ruptures and conflicts characterizing the last century would then not emerge through present language, talk, or discourse, nor by bringing past events related to this place and responsible for its derelict state back to people’s consciousness or to symbolize these relics in some representative statue or text, but by reviving the site, and with it its burdened past, through what people would have least expected – namely through bodies ‘sitting, sleeping, inhaling and exhaling, and staring at fish’²⁵⁹ allowing everyone who visited this site to engage with it in a sensual and non-discursive way that was usually impossible. Those who would usually avoid this place due to the feeling of guilt it triggered or those would come to it but would immediately slip towards the place’s past and its incomprehensible and traumatic pain, would suddenly simply find themselves there. The artistic concept behind this event was then not to simply cover or hide the burdened history this place had been formed of nor to represent its forgotten history in a new way, but to allow for an unexpected, physical and sensual approximation towards this burdened, emotional urban site by reviving it or opening it up with what it lacked.

The pond that was installed at Grzybowski Square contained a machine that pumped ozone through pipes with the ozone, when mixing with the water mist ascending from the pond, dissolving into pure oxygen. The pond was surrounded by a country-like landscape of flowers, grass, and bushes. There were benches and sleeping mats around and water lilies growing inside it. At the opening

257 Rajkowska, *Where the Beast Is Buried*, 42.

258 Think of Benjamin’s image of the artist as a surgeon.

259 Rajkowska, *Where the Beast Is Buried*, 42.

ceremony local residents had brought fish which they released into the ‘breathing water’ filling the excavated burdened site with ‘life.’

During the construction works which included an archeological dig due to the listed status of the square passersby were regularly stopping at the building site and according to Rajkowska some of them told stories about the history of the place. The digging and opening up of the square had therefore made some people talk about past episodes which in the city’s ritualized everyday and its buildings could not be captured or dealt with – yet nobody stayed. Once *Oxygenator* had however been set up and its oxygen producing organism with the green space surrounding it was working, people gathered together. But these people who were sitting or resting by the pond ‘didn’t talk much’, ‘they simply were there, situating their bodies among others.’²⁶⁰ This for Rajkowska did not mean that remembering did not take place. It rather meant that remembering hence reviving relics of past traumatic experiences which remained inextricably connected to this site happened on a physiological, semiotic level – and this potentially in a strange togetherness which through discursive, conscious means could have not been achieved. *Oxygenator* had become an event with the utopian aim to demonstrate that it was precisely in the most burdened and traumatized sites that neighborhood was or had to be made possible – that clean air could or had to be breathed; hence that a breathing space in or against the light of present and past conflicts could or had to be created.



Figure 11. Crater and Rajkowska's *Oxygenator* (2007).

For the two months of its existence *Oxygenator* had therefore transformed a derelict site of the post-communist scene into a ‘space of encounter’ which in contrast to traditional monuments did not simply decorate a public site with a representational sculpture in order to encourage collective forms of remembering but it picked up the abandoned and lost character of the square in order to confront it with new interpersonal, bodily experiences. Like before, Grzybowski Square with its

260 Ibid., 50.

oxygen breathing pond, recalling a rural or plebeian atmosphere, had remained a place that continued falling weirdly out of Warsaw's 'new' post-1989 everyday, but this time it had been turned, inverted, or artistically transformed, into a life-giving space still surrounded by or bordering at traces of a catastrophic past. The site, which due to its traumatic past and the contradicting, uneven architectural mix seemed broken and was thus usually eluded, was revived or returned to public life by the liquid, contingent, and breathing material of water, grass and human beings. Through this oxygen producing event or 'gesture' the painful past symbolized in the buildings of this place was now interlinked with another, contradicting, experience. And from now on this experience was also related to this loaded, symbolical site or urban signifier.

Due to its fluent and participatory features Rajkowska's site-specific installation has often been presented as an example for so-called counter-monuments,²⁶¹ which are mostly understood as monuments that are dedicated to the complex forms of commemorating troubling events or feelings like those linked to the Holocaust. In contrast to the didactic and monumental techniques implemented in traditional monuments counter-monuments, as James Young has argued in his seminal text, are seen as inviting to multi-sensory, engaged, and fluent forms of remembering events and feelings that often cannot be symbolized.²⁶² To others, however, *Oxygenator* served more as a controversial demonstration of our wish to forget an unbearable past. According to Eva Klekot, for example, the oasis set up by Rajkowska in the centre of Warsaw had created an environment that allowed people to actually forget – that had turned Grzybowski Square into a site which did not disturb or interrupt but symbolized the amnesia around past traumata that had become so characteristic for Warsaw.²⁶³ The fact that *Oxygenator* was not permitted as a permanent installation suggests, however, I argue, that something different, perhaps more radical, was happening than in other places of the city, where forgetting, avoiding, or controlling Warsaw's traumatic past had become common features of its post-1989 reality. But in order to understand the potentiality of this art event it is important to direct more attention to its transformative or even 'therapeutic' objectives instead of merely looking at its representative features, or to explore more what this artwork does (its symbolic or structural intervention into the materiality and the psychosocial reality or material of urban space) instead of simply assessing the images it produces. Here again, without claiming to

261 Blacker, 'Spatial Dialogues and the Memory of Absent Jews in Contemporary Polish Art: Yale Bartana, Rafal Betlejewski and Joanna Rajkowska'; Natalia Krzyzanowska, 'The Discourse of Counter-Monuments: Semiotics of Material Commemoration in Contemporary Urban Spaces', *Social Semiotics* 26, no. 5 (2016): 465–85.

262 James E. Young, 'The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today', *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 267–96.

263 Ewa Klekot, 'The Non-Remembrance of the Ghetto (Niepamięć Getta)', *Konteksty - Polska Sztuka Ludowa* 63, no. 1–2 (2009): 46. 'The monument that did commemorate nothing and hence asked to forget' / 'pomnik, który niczego nie upamiętniał, lecz pytał o zapamięnienie.'

be exhaustive, an element of Lacan's psychoanalytic work can be helpful to explore the specific artistic intervention into the psychosocial reality of this square.

In the documentary film *Rendez-vous Chez Lacan* one of his former analysands (Suaanne Hommel) recalls a moment in a session when Lacan suddenly stood up and gently caressed her cheek. This happened when she told him about her continuous nightmares recalling the moment when the Gestapo came to collect Jews at 5am in the morning. After the war these nightmares continued waking her up at 5am. In the moment when she was telling Lacan about these nightmares during her therapy session, hence in the moment when she was mentioning the 'Gestapo', Lacan suddenly got up and interrupted her speech by gently touching her cheek – enacting a 'geste à peau' - a gesture to skin. This anecdote from Lacan's therapeutic sessions has been used by some Lacanians as 'an illustration of what it might mean to intervene at the level of the signifier'²⁶⁴ – others, however have stressed that this intervention did not happen exclusively within the linguistic realm or that it cannot be understood if we look at the changes within symbolic relations only: 'yet something linguistic happens here', Stephen Frosh for example writes, 'and something more as well.'²⁶⁵

By suddenly getting up in the moment when the word 'Gestapo' was used and caressing the woman's cheek, therefore rearranging through his interaction with the analysand's speech the relations between signifiers (linking 'Gestapo' to 'geste à peau'), Lacan, Lapping explains, had 'opened up' the possibility for an unconscious symbolic relation being interrupted *and* shifted. But the actual shift had been facilitated/made possible by the analysand's surprise, namely her strong affective reaction towards this gesture of humaneness. So although the shift in the analysand's psyche had happened within the linguistic realm it had been this strong bodily reaction to this sudden physical, compassionate, and yet symbolic encounter that had created the 'something more' - the event – that had been necessary for the ghostly returns of the past traumatic experience to be changed.

'That surprise', Lacan's former analysand says in the documentary, 'it didn't diminish the pain but it made it something else.' With his sudden and unexpected intervention into the analysand's speech Lacan provided the analysand with a new perspective on that traumatic experience by shifting the fantasmatic structure which before did not allow for this unconscious dynamic to be processed or

264 Claudia Lapping, 'Reflexivity and Fantasy: Surprising Encounters from Interpretation to Interruption', *Qualitative Inquiry* 22, no. 9 (2016): 8.

265 Stephen Frosh, 'What We Are Left With: Psychoanalytic Endings', in *Psychosocial Imaginaries: Perspectives on Temporality, Subjectivities and Activism*, ed. Stephen Frosh (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 210.

changed. The meaning of the signifier 'Gestapo' was not transformed or translated into 'geste a peau', which means the meanings of the 'materially' similar words were not equalized, merged, but on an affective, unconscious level both experiences, that of pain and that of care, were from now on symbolically interlinked. The experienced violence contained in the signifier Gestapo was therefore, whenever it returned in dreams or conscious thoughts, confronted with or opposed by a bodily memory of the experience of human love.

This gesture did not diminish the pain caused by the experienced violence in the past but it meant that every consecutive return of this violence was from now on (on the level of affect but triggered through the symbolic interconnections charged with specific experiences) to be confronted with another reality and potentiality of human, collective life. The focus of Lacan's intervention was hence not so much to show, explore, and symbolically capture what this traumatic experience and its meaning for individuals who were suffering from it meant to them today, how it could be interpreted, but to open up a symbolic space in which experiences that related to the painful relics of a devastating past could be linked to experienced reminders of what life could still become, in view of and despite past and present pain.

Something similar, I argue, happened in the artistic transformation of the square as actualized by the site-specific installation *Oxygenator*. Here, however, the intervention did not take place in the context of a person's individual chains of signifiers but in the context of collective urban life and its urban signifiers and symbolic structures as they materialize in buildings and public sites. Like words in a person's speech so do buildings in an urban environment symbolize and structure, consciously and unconsciously, a collective's identity and memory, with some buildings or places being overwhelmingly charged with relics of unprocessed traumatic experiences. By digging up a hole, by opening up such a haunted site or urban signifier associated with and representing collective traumata, by entering this site and making it visible, conjuring the hiding and ghostly experiences attached to and associated with it, Rajkowska's oxygen producing installation aimed at 'filling' or 'touching' these gaps in Warsaw's everyday life, while simultaneously confronting the returning pain and feelings of guilt with their opposite – namely with an unexpected and surprising experience of humans' ability to be together. The artist had created space for an encounter with human compassion where it was expected least.²⁶⁶ *Oxygenator*, being a new 'symbol' or signifier that was added to the symbolic constellation, the unconscious symbolic relations and the

²⁶⁶ Frosh writes, that the event, the touch, remains with us even if the symbolic intervention has ended: 'It is some kind of event, for sure, like a breaking through of compassion just when you least expect it.' Ibid., 211.

experiences associated with this square, would link/react to the buildings of this place, thus the rubble of past destruction and conflict, with oxygen, water and resting people who did not talk and yet created some kind of togetherness in life. The burdened site, its painful past, was not simply replaced by or translated into a beautiful pond (forgetting) – but it was linked or connected with a new symbol or ‘urban signifier’ due to the strong affective and sensual reaction this sudden emergence of a life-creating source had triggered in people. It was in this surprise, this unexpected gesture of life that the potentiality of this artistic event to change something in our perception of the past, something that could potentially enable a different form of ‘viewing’ this past, of accessing it from a different perspective, was stored. The value of this abandoned, derelict post-communist site was thus not to be found in its ability to express and restore the cultural identity of one specific community or group or to tell the story of a traumatic event as it happened in the past, but precisely the site’s lack of a coherent and stable identity due to which it allowed an affective confrontation with symbolic constellations of Warsaw’s unconscious maps that were usually kept at bay. Rajkowska’s intervention into the urban space was thus similar to a therapist’s intervention into the analysand’s speech – disturbing and shifting unconscious sets of signifiers, not in order to ease the pain or cover up feelings of guilt, but to allow them to become something else.

There is no guarantee that such a shift in the way people in Warsaw relate to the past did actually happen and the critique that this site-specific installation might have served people more in their desire to forget rather than to process and know the past of the Holocaust in a transformative/ progressive way is certainly justified. This is especially the case since the emergence of transitory post-communist sites as internalized and transformed by this artwork does not only allow us to become aware of ghostly realities we usually keep repressed, but a confrontation with these uncanny, haunted places, places that crop up when known structures go through a transition or crisis, also triggers an increased urge to escape the uncertainty and unpredictability characterizing these sites. But what I want to stress here is that the artwork’s form, its specific way of changing the symbolic and aesthetic constellation of this public site, offers us a way of thinking the relation between past and present beyond ritualized forms of forgetting and remembering traumatic experiences associated with this site. It prevented the Israeli tourist from stepping right into the past he or she expected to find in this place and it simultaneously disallowed Warsaw’s population from simply avoiding it. The disturbance caused by *Oxygenator* is then to be understood as the intense and unexpected experience of community and care at a place it would have been least expected. It urged us to consider that something has to heal, shift, loosen, or vaporize in an almost physical sense, that people have to be brought together in a bodily way, or that atonement and forgiveness

may have to happen sensually and beyond our conscious control in order for us to become able to consciously/cognitively remember or allow others to forget. This is the artwork's utopian ambition expressed in its constitutive form – its ambition of aligning one burdened and avoided urban signifier with its opposite, namely a signifier of hope and care that created a sudden experience of warmth when fear or pain was expected; not in order to bring something to a close, nor to diminish the pain (the buildings surrounding this place had remained the same – carrying the same marks of a traumatic history) – but to change it, to allow us to be stunned or touched by something we would have not expected – not at this place, not together with other people, not in this form. It is the transient materiality of the post-communist site, picked up and translated by this post-communist artwork, that tells us of the need to allow people to be together in places that have torn them apart for remembering the past.

The ephemeral character of post-communist places

Both artworks, Bartana's ... *And Europe will be Stunned* and Rajkowska's *Oxygenator* are post-communist artworks that have been developed around and from within transitory public sites in Warsaw that at the time of the artworks' creation or installation were characterized by their abandoned or dysfunctional state – the 10th Anniversary Stadium, the main square in Muranow or Grzybowski Square. These were public sites that neither belonged to the new present nor were they really part of a known past. As post-communist sites they were places that were not understood and thus avoided. While in post-1989 Poland the new state authorities were busy setting up and forming structures and foundations for the new political edifice of a state that was to allow people to live and express their national Polish identity after the breakdown of the communist regime, these post-communist sites were in some way left out of this process – they were sites in a state of waiting. Neither or not yet part of the dominant contemporary designs for Poland's new national democracy nor any longer belonging to a past in which they had once been created, these post-communist places triggered artistic interventions which confronted and captured relics of past traumatic experiences – not in order to represent or interpret the dark and hidden sites of our collective existence but to transform, as art, the way how collective specters were preventing today's societal life to change, live, flow, or turn into something different, based on the experiences made in the past.

These post-communist places, mediated by the way they were explored, actualized, and visualized in artworks, were not places or buildings that captured the continuity of experiences or the existence

of common narratives or identities. Instead, they showed rather architecture's potential to express 'other' processes characterizing a group's psychogeography; namely processes like deliberate or wanted repression or collective forgetting of something once known; or of the spectral existence of a desire for a future form of existence for which no structure to express itself could yet be found. Instead of creating and giving people a sense of identity and belonging, these places rather capture some kind of knowledge of the ephemeral, fragmented, and fragile aspects of our existence; they become material gathering places for relics of unknown or unconscious elements of collective life that come up when sites are not structured or designed by conscious (official/hegemonic) processes; reminding us of the limits of collective identity and therefore making us look or walk away.

What we usually avoid seeing or knowing, the places we usually don't want to be in, are picked up and mimicked by post-communist artworks such as those discussed above. When interacting and working artistically with these derelict or transitional post-communist sites the artworks discussed above bring up aspects of contemporary life in Europe that do not offer themselves to immediate and easy solutions. They bring up the existential question of the possibility of collective life after the destruction of otherness, radically challenging the idea of healing in the sense of restoring or repairing a previously existing unity. But they also trigger actualizations of utopian desires, the need for a new and better beginning or a rupture with what is experienced as unbearable struggle while bringing this desire in close relation with the unknown or repressed knowledge of the impossibility of its actual realization. And finally, these post-communist art events insist on and remind us of the importance of care amidst an acknowledgement of the violence and destruction dominating the history of human life.

If a city is used as an image of a collective's psyche, then these artworks show what happens or could happen if we enter the dark and abandoned sites of this common psychic space. They show us the importance and critical potentiality of destroyed, cracked sites. Ruined sites not in the sense of institutionally integrated and controlled ruins in the form of public monuments (in Britain Coventry Cathedral would be probably one of the most famous of such 'official ruins'), but as forgotten or abandoned sites that due to their crumbling and timeless existence store, contain or become docking points for 'other' (unthought, repressed, painful, ambiguous) elements of collective life. And it is art's 'autonomy' from political and scientific institutions, its specific relation to idiosyncratic and sensual experiences that allows it to step into these worlds and make them available to us by challenging common/public thought or behavior patterns.

Critical potentiality for a change in current collective relations is hence not stored in closed structures or fixed identities that have their identical/positive meaning and time; collective memory that confronts itself with the unspeakable is not contained in rebuilt and preserved relics of the past, neither does salvation of past destruction come from practices of collective forgetting. What these artworks point at or reach towards is an idea of change that requires us to relate to past catastrophes and dreamworlds while entering the uncertain and unsettled realm of what is excluded from the public or official sphere (non-identical/unconscious). They express a relentless urge for hope and life pushing against the constant threat of destruction. But they do this in a way that both hope and life emerge only if we are able to face or engage ourselves with the rubble of past destruction. This engagement with what we have been in the process of becoming happens in the case of these artworks not on a level of conscious discourse – but through the means of non-identical, artistic experience – in each case it is the specific experience triggered by a revived idea, vision, or place that forces us to rethink and explore these ideas, visions, or places anew – not allowing us to simply continue with our habitual ways of ‘knowing’ these public sites.

But these site-specific post-communist artworks show us yet something else.

On my last trip to Warsaw I wanted to visit the park in which the settlement of the Jewish Renaissance Movement of Bartana’s second film had been constructed. I knew that the settlement itself was no longer there; however, I thought, if I go there anyway I might be able to imagine how it felt encountering such an uncanny structure at this particular historic and burdened place. At first I couldn't find the respective park and when I almost decided to give up I suddenly found myself there – stunned by its new shape and social function. Today, at the place where utopian desires together with feelings of past pain and guilt had started dancing in and against the sound of contemporary post-communist aporia, Warsaw's new reclaimed Museum of the History of Polish Jews is enthroned. The transitory post-communist site with its undefined, broken, and uncanny features that had given rise to specific artistic actualizations of the current status quo, has been replaced by a new, functioning, and representative cultural jewel in today’s Polish capital.



Figure 11. Jewish Museum in Warsaw, photo by Wojciech Kryński, and the National Stadium in Warsaw, photo by Przemysław Jahr / Wikimedia Commons.

The same thing happened to almost all of the sites that had become starting points for the artistic interventions discussed above – the unseen, abandoned places or buildings had been turned into new flagships or models of today’s Polish nation. The 10th Anniversary Stadium had been replaced by Poland’s National Stadium – the open hole created by the old stadium’s structure made of the rubble left after World War Two is now filled up with the foundations of today’s stadium, sitting in the colors of Poland’s national flag victoriously on top of the relics of a historical epoch that as such cannot be known or seen anymore. Grzybowski Square, in the same vein, has been equipped with a permanent pond. This pond, however, does not breath, its sides are not the organic space created by the grass and bushes planted during Rajkowska’s installation. Instead a dense pattern of concrete blocks frames the decorative water at the centre of the square, turning this previously derelict site into a functioning, clean and neutral area for the city’s business life.



Figure 12. Plac Grzybowski today.

The post-communist gaps in post-1989 Warsaw, their character as thresholds or temporal cracks, causing but also allowing for a crisis – for the painful shifts in past and present identical structures, are already in the process of being closed – again. Anything that could potentially hurt is covered by reaffirming and static structures of a new/old functioning Polish identity. What used to be repressed (murder of the other, otherness during communist times, desire for the new) is now consciously controlled/structured.

Chapter Six

Failing in Berlin

Post-communist art at the 7th Berlin Biennale and the fear of unexpected beginnings or endings

In 2010 acclaimed Polish artist Artur Żmijewski was appointed as curator of the 7th Berlin Biennale (7BB) that was due to take place in Berlin in 2012. Shortly after his appointment he announced Polish curator Joanna Warsza as well as the Russian art group Voina as his assistant curators. Many, although not all, artists and activists who participated in this biennale came from the post-communist context too including, for example Joanna Rajkowska (discussed in the previous chapter), Polish artist Pawel Althamer and Czech artist Martin Zet. Others who participated in this biennale had previously worked with the post-communist site, for example Yael Bartana whose *Jewish Renaissance Movement*, also discussed in the previous chapter, returned in the context of this event too. The 7BB can therefore be seen as a post-communist event – certainly in regard to the curatorial team and its links to art practices and theories in Poland or Russia, but also in relation to many of the artworks or projects that have been produced in the context of this biennale. As such, however, it turned out to be strangely placed within a socio-historical context that to a wide extent would reject this art event and regard it as failed.

Despite the high expectations that had been directed at this biennale and its claim to present and explore new forms of a pragmatist, political art, its general reception by the predominantly German audience turned out to be extraordinarily negative. Although this biennale had triggered a wider media response and more discussions than any previous biennale in Berlin, many articles in specialized art magazines but also within the broader environment of German media condemned this event as childish kitsch, as neither art nor politics.²⁶⁷ Often these articles were also characterized by a patronizing and sneering tone that described curators as well as many of the participating artists and activists as non-reflective, superficial and brute. The title of an article in a German art's magazine published shortly before the opening of the Biennale, 'Lasset die Kindlein kommen'/'Let the little children come', which positioned the German art scene in a clearly hierarchical position of a master in contrast to its childish other, exemplified the attitude and language that this event had triggered in many art critics and visitors.

Such reactions and statements are reminiscent of the Interpol exhibition in Stockholm (1996) when participating Western artists condemned the projects of some of their Eastern counter-parts and criticized them for brutally transgressing any decent idea of art; and they also resonate with what Boris Buden observed as the patronizing relation of the Western European subject to its Eastern European other (see Chapter Two).²⁶⁸ At the same time, however, a more complex and detailed discussion of the concept and forms that this biennale had produced are still missing. The present chapter therefore picks up the strong, antagonistic reaction to this art event by the German public and explores it from the perspective of its post-communist character or reality. This shall not only provide another occasion to think about the specificity of the post-communist condition as it emerges in particular in contemporary art practices but shall also open a discussion of the post-communist condition and its relation to a 'Western' public space and environment – a space which in contrast to the sites explored in the previous chapter is currently not in a transitory state and also

²⁶⁷ Hanno Rauterberg for instance, a German art historian and author, argued, aggressively and in a disappointed tone, that the only thing this biennale has been able to show was 'the destruction of freedom, the end of art'. It had destroyed the aesthetic freedom that had developed in the last 250 years since the creation of modern art in its Kantian understanding of a purposeless, pleasurable thing and got replaced by ordinary charitable and political activism. Hanno Rauterberg, 'Berlin Biennale: Die Ohnmacht Der Parolenpinsler | ZEIT ONLINE', *Die Zeit*, 3 May 2012, <http://www.zeit.de/2012/19/Berlin-Biennale>; see also: Niklas Maak, 'Berlin Biennale: Kritik Der Zynischen Vernunft', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9 May 2012; Others, such as Sebastian Loewe, took this biennale to exemplify the end of politics or political movements if they entered the realm of art. It showed, Loewe argued, what happened to activism if it left the political sphere – with activism being deprived of its political power and turned into exhibits (as was the destiny of the Occupy movement when it was invited to participate in this biennale. See below). Sebastian Loewe, 'When Protest Becomes Art: The Contradictory Transformations of the Occupy Movement at Documenta 13 and Berlin Biennale 7', *FIELD. A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism*, accessed 12 July 2017, <http://field-journal.com/issue-1/loewe>.

²⁶⁸ Buden, *Zone des Übergangs*.

does not have to come to terms with the contradictions and relics of a past communist identity.²⁶⁹ What can we know about the desire for change and new beginnings when explored through the post-communist condition in the context of the event of the 7BB and what do we find out about the ‘West’s’ own ‘communist ghosts’ when examining the reactions and criticism triggered by this art event? These are the questions that guide the following discussion.

7th Berlin Biennial and curatorial art

The curators of the biennale aimed at breaking with many conventions and standards of the usual and yet diverse traditions of art biennials. Instead of exhibiting new artistic and curatorial approaches in relation to a specific theme through an arrangement of objects that could be sold on the art market they wanted to create an event in which the biennale structure, i.e. its financial resources as well as the public attention it attracted, were *used* to enact art as a ‘tool for social transformation (...) influencing politics *directly* (my emphasis).’²⁷⁰ The curatorial aim was therefore not to exhibit art as a medium of cultural expression within its autonomous realm, nor to blindly reproduce a fantasized idea of a political art that, as the curators argued, had so far not been able to step out of its isolated artistic, autonomous realm, but to allow for art to develop its radical and transformative potentiality in the form of ‘concrete activities leading to visible effects.’²⁷¹ Art was therefore to be developed and realized as a specific tool of political agency and as a concrete medium for sparking direct political change beyond its autonomous realm.²⁷²

One of the main curatorial paradigms guiding this event was to transgress and open up the institutional frame of a biennale as much as possible. Whatever defined and constructed a biennale *as* biennale had to be challenged for the art produced within this institutional context to be able to

269 Although Eastern Germany and with it the Eastern parts of Berlin belonged to the communist East, the GDR is often treated as a special case in the existing literature on Eastern Europe and its transition from a communist into a capitalist society. One reason for this is the GDR’s integration into an already existing Western democracy after 1989 in the event of Germany’s reunification which meant that the transition towards a neoliberal structure developed in a very different way than it did in the rest of Eastern Europe. Neither have German territories, identity and culture been traditionally associated with the Eastern parts of Europe. Finally, also the institutional structure within which this art event had taken place, namely its form as biennale, added a strong transnational element to it, however, with the latter being strongly shaped by a Western art scene. It is for these reasons that I frame this post-communist event as an intervention in a societal space which is not primarily characterized by the transitory state of the post-communist condition. Rather this is a space shaped from the perspective of the hegemonic West which imagines itself, consciously or unconsciously, to have emerged from the breakdown of the communist East in the position of a victor.

270 ‘7th Berlin Biennale - Berlin Biennale’, accessed 21 November 2014, <http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/1st-6th-biennale/7th-berlin-biennale>.

271 Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warsza, eds., *Forget Fear* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Koenig, 2012), 10.

272 For the participants of the 7BB this meant, Żmijewski writes, that they had to be able and willing to leave the artistic space and ‘to cross the threshold into genuine action.’ *Ibid.*, 13.

step out of it. Accordingly the curators decided to allow free admission to all exhibition places as well as to spread the activities of this biennale over various sites in Berlin of which only a few were actual arts institutions. The art and actions organized during the biennale as well as the publicity it gathered were therefore taken to places and seen or noticed by people who usually would not get in touch with the happenings of a biennale.²⁷³ Many projects had also started well before the official opening or continued developing beyond the end of the biennale – in each case transgressing the time frame provided by the art world while at the same time using its structure for making these projects happen.

The individual projects produced in the context of the 7BB similarly transgressed the borders between art and politics or the public realm. The *New World Summit* by Jonas Staal, for example, an ‘artistic *and* political (my emphasis)’ organization for representatives of political groups that are placed on international terrorist lists, organized in the context of the 7BB a meeting for the ‘members’ of this imaginary and yet existing, although repressed, political structure.²⁷⁴ Selected groups that regard themselves as agents of fundamental democratic principles but are not accepted as democratic political entities by existing nation states (e.g. the Kurdish Women’s Movement) were given the opportunity to assemble and discuss the limits and borders of existing democracies from the perspective of those who are usually excluded from its official sites and discourses.²⁷⁵ In a similar way, Yael Bartana’s *Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland*, which follows the utopian aim to return 3.3 Million Jews to Poland, organized its first International Congress during the 7BB.²⁷⁶ Here, political strategies for this utopia to become real were discussed as well as staged – put into practice while at the same time being perceived or experienced as staged performance. But in both cases, the art space of the biennale created room for political imaginaries and actions which outside the art institution could have not been realized.

Other projects of the 7BB, on the other hand, were characterized by the inclusion or integration of existing political discourses, events, or institutions into the artistic environment of the biennale. The

273 Such as the Deutschlandhaus (Berlin) or Saint Elisabeth church (Berlin).

274 ‘New World Summit’, accessed 16 August 2017, <http://newworldsummit.org/>.

275 The artistic and political idea behind this project was to allow for a discussion of the limits and potentialities of democratic structures from the perspective of political groups that normally for different reasons are being silenced and prosecuted by today’s democracies. This ‘alternative parliament’ had been made possible and was realized due to the structure and space provided by the biennial and its artistic institutional environment but at the same time it remained an institution that was politically impossible or rather illegal outside of this structure.

276 A utopian social movement that, as I wrote in chapter six, was trying to become real while constantly slipping unexpectedly towards traumatic pasts, organized an actual reunion of its members – or of people who could imagine or spontaneously happened to be members of a movement that was struggling to become one – again blurring or challenging, like in the case of Staal’s project, established or ritualized perceptions of what was, from a political perspective, possible or impossible.

University of Art in Berlin, for example, offered a six months scholarship to a politician for an academic-political experiment that sought to enhance the collaboration or exchange between political actors and artistic institutions.²⁷⁷ Another curatorial act of this kind was an invitation to the Occupy Movement to take part in the 7BB and use the space of the biennale for their resistance against neoliberal power which it usually expressed in the occupation of public spaces. Here political activists or functionaries were encouraged to enter the artistic sphere and institution together with their political tools and strategies – and to use this ‘autonomous’ arts space in order to develop their politics in a way the political realm would not allow them to do (which at the same time meant to change the autonomous artistic space). This not only opened up the institutional frame of the art world but also encouraged or enabled an opening up of the political sphere towards the space and realm of artistic practice and discourse.

Another aspect of the curatorial concept and its specific notion of a pragmatist art was the ‘transport’ or ‘transfer’ of forms of artistic or political action from other geopolitical places to the physical and socio-political environment of contemporary Berlin and its artistic and political scene. Objects or forms of action that ‘usually’ were not part of Berlin’s environment were brought, transported, to the biennale. These were presented not as ‘exhibits’ in a traditional, art historical sense as which they would ‘represent’ art practices from a specific cultural area, but rather as some kind of ‘foreign’ interventions into a societal fabric which due to its specific historical and psychosocial state would have not been able, politically or artistically, to produce such artistic objects. In *Key of Return*, for example, an already existing, enormous metal sculpture of an oversized key that had been created by refugees from the Palestinian refugee camp Aida near Bethlehem, was transported to Berlin to be temporarily exhibited in the context of the 7BB. An artistic object addressing the marginalization of Palestinian people, who had been expelled from the territories they once used to inhabit and the key symbolizing the houses they could not return to, was moved to a different environment – with the effort and cost of this artistic transport turning into an emblematic expression of the ‘complexity’ and ‘heaviness’ of the realities this sculpture was dealing with – now directly addressing and confronting a predominantly German biennale audience.

In comparison to such a ‘transport’ of an artistic object the launch of the *Political Critique Club* in Berlin was an example of a transport of a political or public model – this time from the post-communist context to Berlin. It was a transfer of a certain socio-historical form of public political

²⁷⁷ Some of the projects that had been developed in the course of this exchange between artistic and political discourse were presented or enacted during the biennale.

engagement or action into a context in which such politics did not exist or seemingly could not develop. *Political Critique* or *Krytyka Polityczna*, which is its original Polish name, is an organization of contemporary left-wing intellectuals that was founded in post-1989 Poland. Its members aim to develop progressive and emancipatory positions within the post-communist public, specifically in Eastern European countries where a politics linked to practices and theories of the political left is often marginalized by discourses that remain predominantly suspicious of or resistant against left-wing politics. By launching a branch in Berlin and making this launch part of the biennale, the organization *Political Critique* aimed, as its members explained, to learn from political practices common in Berlin but also to introduce or ‘transport’ to Berlin, mediated by the artistic space of the biennale, ‘post-communist’ forms of political engagement that were inspired and fueled by the recent ‘*historical experience of the possibility of changing the system* and a still active model of engagement, self-organization, and action towards change (my emphasis).’²⁷⁸

Besides these efforts to create a structure for ‘social movements’ that without the artistic context could not exist, would not be seen or often did not want to be seen, as well as to impact on the societal fabric of a specific geopolitical site by ‘planting’ objects or forms of political action that did not belong to it, another element of the curatorial strategy was to re-direct public attention that was institutionally directed to the biennale towards events or projects in Berlin that had been withdrawn from or were made invisible in the public sphere – realities that were lacking (public) attention. In that sense, Berlin’s ‘Deutschlandhaus’, a listed building in Berlin that now belongs to the *Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation/ Stiftung Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung (SFVV)*, which was founded to commemorate the history of the expulsion of Germans after World War Two, was chosen as one of the exhibition spaces for the biennale. The foundation has been criticized by many groups and individuals in Germany but also in Poland and the Czech Republic, who saw in these developments attempts to redirect the general focus on Germany’s role as the main perpetrator of the last world war towards its history as victim. ‘Metaphorically speaking’, the curators Żmijewski and Warsza write, ‘Deutschlandhaus, seems to be a container of repressed or excluded German memory, which the *Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation (SFVV)* would like to bring back to focus.’²⁷⁹ Objects that remind one of the expulsion of Germans from territories that today belong to Eastern European countries (predominantly Poland) had so far not found a public space to be exhibited or ‘faced’. The curatorial team of the 7BB picked up this tension within the

278 ‘Krytyka Polityczna in Berlin - Berlin Biennale’, accessed 12 July 2017, <http://blog.berlinbiennale.de/projekte/krytyka-polityczna-in-berlin-5-21109>.

279 ‘Stück Für Stück Erinnern. Erste Objekte Für Die Künftige Ausstellung - Berlin Biennale’, accessed 12 July 2017, <http://blog.berlinbiennale.de/projekte/stuck-fur-stuck-erinnern-erste-objekte-fur-die-kunftige-ausstellung-22161>.

public sphere and reacted to the ‘repressed’ state of these symbolic objects by organizing a temporary exhibition showing these objects within the building in which they might eventually be assembled in an official exhibition once the documentation centre will open in future.²⁸⁰

A similar strategy was used when the curators decided to cooperate with a civil initiative in Berlin that was fighting for the completion of the *Memorial to the Sinti and Roma murdered under the Nationalist Socialist Regime*. The construction of the memorial had been approved in 2008 but the building process got interrupted due to conflicts between city authorities and the artist who had conceptualized it. Since then the memorial seemed forgotten in its unfinished state – neither there nor absent, it represented an attempt at collective public commemoration that had suddenly come to a standstill. By including this ‘unfinished’ site of the memorial into the constellation of the projects organized and shown during the biennale the missing public attention ought to be revived – and indeed the memorial was finalized in October 2012.

Another example of the interventionist strategies of the biennale that aimed at directly shifting, disturbing or creating public attention for specific realities was the public ‘space’ that was created for one of Żmijewski’s films, *Berek* (1999), which was streamed on a daily basis in the so-called news rooms installed at the biennale. *Berek* (1999) is a film that shows a group of naked adults playing the children’s game ‘Game of Tag’/‘Berek’ in the gas chamber of a former concentration camp. Conceptualized as an induction of psychotherapeutic memory that would place the activities of play and laughter right next to memories of the industrial murder of European Jews during World War Two, hence aiming at activating these antithetical symbols simultaneously, the artistic film was intended and was also often read as a therapeutic means for today’s society ‘to emancipate ourselves from the trauma’ (Żmijewski) that was being reproduced by the ‘untouchable’ and overly painful character of memories of the Holocaust (see text of the accompanying catalogue of the exhibition). By confronting these memories in an artistic, symbolical realm, with their existential opposite, so Żmijewski’s intention, these ‘traumatic events’ could be ‘overcome’. Something broken could be fixed. The film had been initially part of the major exhibition *Side by Side. Poland and Germany 1000 years of Art and History* which had taken place in 2011, but was removed from the exhibition at the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin few days after the exhibition’s opening due to a public complaint issued by Berlin’s Jewish community which had criticized the artistic film as

²⁸⁰ By doing so these objects were revealed from their institutional/structural cellar before they would find their new institutional home, hence before the federation would offer its own and final public version of its use of history. By including this specific venue and organizing this temporary exhibition the curators used the artistic space of the biennale to intervene in and explore the ongoing processes within the German public that were supposed to shape images and narratives about German expellees being, as they stress, ‘close to it’.

antisemitic and disrespectful. Żmijewski himself interpreted this decision as an act of ‘censorship’, a removal of an acclaimed work that had been previously shown and seen at various sites but had suddenly started making people feel uncomfortable in the context of this specific exhibition of German-Polish relations. The event of the 7BB and the curators’ freedom to select the artworks that were to be exhibited were then used to prevent or react against these attempts of repressing a close, unusual, and difficult confrontation with the event of the Holocaust by creating public space for a piece which in a different context could not be shown – and perhaps not seen.

Finally, the biennale’s strong emphasis on the significance and possibility of ‘effective’ or socially applied art found expression in artistic projects that worked more directly with physical objects from the societal sphere – physical objects that contained or had acquired a specific meaning or were linked to a specific realm of knowledge. The Czech artist Martin Zet’s *Germany gets rid of it* was one such projects. The public object around which his work developed was Thilo Sarrazin’s popular but controversially discussed book *Deutschland schafft sich ab/Germany gets rid of itself*. Sarrazin, a politician of the German Social Democratic Party, had published this book in 2010 in which he argued that the decline in birthrate in German families combined with a continuous increase of ‘problematic’ immigration and an increasing impoverishment of households would lead to a population that in future would not only be poorer but also less intelligent and more dependent on public services. The book was heavily criticized for its provocative and scientifically unproven theses which in many instances leaned towards extreme right-wing, reactionary, and specifically anti-Muslim jargon and yet it had become the best selling book on politics by a German author in a decade. Attempting to challenge, in an ‘artistically applied’ manner, the influence this book had on the public sphere, Zet intended to invert the meaning of Sarrazin’s title and asked for donations of Sarrazin’s book in order for the artist to be able to transform these books into an artistic sculpture – hence to withdraw these books (discursive objects) symbolically and materially, based on a voluntary act of getting rid of them, from current public debates or discourses.²⁸¹ At the end, however, only a few books had been donated and instead Zet’s project had triggered a wide media outcry in Germany with people criticizing him for using Nazi strategies resembling those of book burning for his art.

In all these diverse ways ‘political’ movements, ideas, or actions that otherwise did not have their (institutionalized) stage or structure – that were either not seen or not tolerated by authorities, that

281 Zet wrote: ‘Sarrazin is a Social Democrat who is feeding a wave of right-wing, extremist tendencies going through Europe at the moment. It might change the continent if we do not say: “Get rid of it”’.

could not become ‘active’ or that were alternatively excessively dominating public discourses – either gained through the 7BB visibility and attention or were withdrawn from the public sphere they usually occupied. And although the single projects in themselves were all very different in their kind they had one thing in common – none of these projects could have been clearly assigned to either the category of art or the category of politics. Even the Occupy movement, which had been invited to expand and continue its political work within the context of the biennale, had turned into an exhibit as which it did not want to be seen. Members of Occupy had complained that their camps, set up within the gallery space, had been turned into a ‘human zoo’ and equally had visitors of the 7BB expressed discomfort about their role as ‘voyeurs’ of political activism, as which they experienced themselves when walking through the exhibition rooms hosting Occupy.²⁸² The political activism of Occupy had been transformed into something akin to an artistic performance and this transformation was not well received. ‘We work without limitations’, the Voina group wrote on their website, ‘and the Berlin Biennale hasn’t mandated any kind of frame.’ And indeed, limits were crossed, those of the art world and simultaneously those of the political sphere, with all of these border-crossing events being united by the curatorial work under the common signifier ‘Forget Fear’ - the biennale’s title.

The extraordinary and eventually also the most controversial aspect of this biennale was therefore how all these artistic and political strategies were composed and administered into one ‘meta-artwork’ – or one mega event – that could neither be understood through the symbolic patterns of the art world nor through existing political discourses.²⁸³ Like a modern avant-garde artist who arranges his or her material in a way that as a new totality it communicates a different image or vision of the world – and eventually that of a different future – the curators of the 7BB arranged the transgressive and liminal projects of the biennale into a new social space contradicting and challenging the status quo.²⁸⁴ And this curatorial or artistic meta-strategy, I argue, was not a

282 The notion ‘human zoo’ was often used by art critics and political activists to describe the ‘failed’ integration of the Occupy movement in the curatorial concept of the biennale. It has been repeatedly argued that Occupy had turned into a kitschy display. Interestingly, for my three-year old daughter ‘zoo’ and ‘museum’ means the same thing. For a while she even said ‘seum’ instead of museum – creating a new word to express the similarity she experienced in these two events. This relation to the audience, which found itself in the position of passively consuming the Occupy movement like an ‘exotic’ object - being in the zoo and being in a museum becoming the same thing - was rejected or criticized as bad art. The experienced discomfort was interpreted as failure of the artist and the artistic constellation.

283 This centrality of the curatorial/hierarchical work which continued shaping the form of the art event throughout the biennale despite the strong emphasis on grass-roots politics and horizontality by the curators themselves, was criticized as ‘artistic hubris’.

284 I argue that this biennale did not offer a space outside or against the neoliberal structure – something that is often seen as art’s potentiality in the context of Relational Aesthetics – not a new, liberating world, but pulled the audience towards the ambiguous space of crisis - neither confirming status quo nor offering a ‘new alternative’. For an argument that links this biennale to Relational Aesthetics see: Panos Kompatsiaris, ‘Curating Resistances:

coincidence but itself a 'foreign', post-communist, element transported to a societal context that had not been prepared for an encounter of this kind.

Populist subjectivity and the avant-garde artist: political experiences return

In November 1976 Jacek Kuroń, one of the leading figures of Poland's opposition against the communist government, wrote: 'Open protest, synchronized in a number of centers, unites the country and becomes a social movement,'²⁸⁵ stressing the importance of the simultaneity and solidarity of various social struggles if radical change within an inappropriate and malfunctioning system ought to be achieved. Isolated strikes, he argued, 'become significant social movements only on occasions when the whole community is under attack by the State.'²⁸⁶ Under the subheading 'What Should We Do?' Kuroń, concluded: 'The opposition must immediately start organizing a number of linked groups representing the widest possible spectrum of views.'²⁸⁷

Two months before this text was written, Jacek Kuroń had been amongst the founding members of KOR (Komitet Obrony Robotników/Worker's Defence Committee),²⁸⁸ a civic organization that was founded after the brutal suppression of workers' strikes by communist authorities in June 1976. And four years after the foundation of KOR the strikes in the Gdańsk shipyard sparked exactly such a nation-wide movement as Kuroń had envisioned, uniting not only the protests of workers from all around the country but also linking the particular opposition groups formed by students, peasants, intellectuals as well as the Catholic church under one and the same common idea and signifier: Solidarność.

Today, in French Critical Theory, particularly in relation to Laclau's conceptualization of populist movements and their relation to politics, Solidarność, Laclau's own example, has become paradigmatic for the realities and potentialities of populist movements and their ability to achieve structural changes if not revolutionize a whole system.²⁸⁹ United under the signifier Solidarność a popular subjectivity was constructed out of various groups with each of them bringing forth desires and demands that could not be satisfied by the hegemonic system in place – each of these groups

Ambivalences and Potentials of Contemporary Art Biennials', *Communication, Culture & Critique* 7, no. 1 (March 2014): 76–91.

285 Jacek Kuroń, 'Document on Contemporary Poland: Reflections on a Program of Action', *The Polish Review* 22, no. 3 (1977): 60.

286 Ibid., 62.

287 Ibid., 67.

288 One year later, this was reorganized into Committee for Social Self-Defence KOR.

289 Ernesto Laclau, 'Populism: What's in a Name?', in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London; New York: Verso, 2005), 39.

hence having in common that their demands referred to realities which lay outside the existing system. In contemporary post-communist Poland, Kuroń's ideas and the forms of civic social action as realized by KOR, or later Solidarność, return not only in the realm of theory but also in political practice as well as in its signifiers and images. In 2015, the year in which the national conservative party PIS introduced a range of controversial amendments to Poland's constitution, which were heavily criticized by European countries, a civic organization called KOD was founded by Polish citizens. The aim of this non-party organization which unites various opposition groups and individuals under one movement was to protect democracy in Poland.

In this sense, could we not interpret the 7BB as a post-communist event in which elements or traces of such a historical experience of a 'popular subjectivity' return? An event that aimed to *unite* what was under-represented, discriminated against, or repressed by the current system, merging it into one counter-force or counter-form that would effectively challenge the status quo – not, however, by working within the realm of conscious discourse (like populist movements) but by reassembling the societal sphere, again like the political avant-garde artist, from within society's unconscious realms.²⁹⁰ Both the political avant-garde as well as the traces of mass social movements against the former communist state are experiences that shape the history of the 'other Europe' but both are also marked by a strong, experienced mismatch between fantasies/ideas and actual developments. But isn't it precisely this ambiguous character of their history that makes them likely to return within the transitional phase of the post-communist moment – their meaning not yet settled – their appearance in the past not yet understood – something could still be rescued or alternatively still has to be put to rest – something about these 'forms of political action' or 'radical initiatives' that today cannot be said (or does not want to be heard) but still has to be communicated?

The artistic realm (in contrast to the official political sphere in Eastern and Western European countries) may therefore be seen in this sense as a site that allows exploring these unprocessed relics of radical politics as well as a realm for working through the frustration associated with them – a realm that does not force us to repress, neither simply repeat the ambiguous political and utopian projects of the past but that allows us to find out who one was/could have been in the process of

290 Groys describes how the dictatorial ambitions of the aesthetico-political discourse of the early Russian Avant-garde were expressed in its attempts to restructure, modify and harmonize the unconscious sphere of societal life and how it therefore directly competes with the state 'which also appeals to the subconscious.' Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 17. In an interview with J. Warsza Artur Żmijewski says: 'I've asked myself whether the language of art is capable of getting people religiously or politically aroused. Could artists acquire the same manipulative skills as politicians? How do you exert influence on people's actions? Artistic action must take on a performative character, which means it has to interact with reality, and reality must react, change, and become an active part of the process.'

becoming (active) (see my discussion of the ‘future perfect’ in Chapter Five). Instead the ‘Forget Fear’ project was widely criticized if not ridiculed – but the ghostly returns of political experiences associated with communist times may help explain why.

This biennale was not rejected by its mainly Western audience, because it raised radically different discursive positions – in fact its main curatorial claim to explore art’s relation to politics so that art’s power could be effectively used has by now become an established and widely debated claim or question within contemporary art discourse. The expectations directed at this event were therefore also accordingly high. What, however, may have provoked the huge wave of negative and yet often superficial (aggressive-defensive) critique was rather an unexpected gap between what was said (artistic discourse) and the way it was said or enacted (artistic event) with the latter being profoundly shaped by experiences the Western subject could not identify with. In a situation in which the Western subject (German public as well as art world) thought it would be presented with an image of its existing ego (high expectations directed towards this event) the image it was confronted with was different and to a wide extent not explainable through the symbolic structures available. Something familiar yet strange characterized the 7BB, leading to an unexpected encounter with the ‘other Europe’ in the midst of a mostly Western art world. And maybe it was precisely this uncanny aspect, this uncanny encounter with one’s ‘double’, which also explains the lack of any serious analysis of the biennale’s concept and strategies despite the quickly established consensus that this art event had failed (repression).

Freud's uncanny encounter with the double

According to Freud the double is an encounter with an image of oneself. In such encounters this image however is not perceived or seen as belonging to oneself (to my self), but experienced as an uncanny trait of someone else.²⁹¹ We all know this kind of situation in which we meet someone we don’t like but don’t know really why. In some of these cases the reason for our dislike might be, if we follow Freud’s argument, the fact that the person we meet reminds us, unconsciously, of some knowledge about ourselves which we carry with us, again unconsciously, but don’t want to know. An encounter with the double is therefore the effect of an externalizing projection of an unexpected confrontation with a truth about ourselves which we are not willing to accept. The experienced threat to the coherence of our present ego-identity is consequently transformed into a strange look

²⁹¹ Someone else being experienced as strange, provoking an alienating experience of oneself; ‘the self made strange.’ Stephen Frosh, *Hauntings: Psychoanalysis and Ghostly Transmissions* (Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 23.

or character trait of the other allowing us to avoid a confrontation with our own contradictory being while disliking the other for being who we, unconsciously, know we are or fear to be.

This uncanny ‘too much’-ness of the other which actually says something about ourselves has according to Freud a specific content or effect.²⁹² It represents those aspects that question the current ego and therefore remind the self of its finitude or mortality. If another person appears to us as strange then this therefore does not mean, at least not only, that this person reflects exactly who we are, but rather that an ambiguous combination of familiar and unfamiliar aspects that we experience in that moment as characteristic of that person reminds us of the ambiguous truth we have to cope with every day – namely the fact that although we *are* now, one day we will be ‘no more’.²⁹³

Freud’s multidimensional explanation of the uncanny feeling produced by an unexpected encounter with the double other has thus, as Frosh stresses, important implications in regard to our perception of present time. According to Frosh the disturbance expressed in the uncanniness of the encounter is importantly one of a temporal kind, because what our double reminds us of is what we have expelled from our *present* image of ourselves; one that, mediated by the slight difference in the other’s identity, reminds us of what lies before and after the constitution of present identity and life.²⁹⁴

The double, hence, works in different temporal directions at the same time. It works according to the logic of a trauma, bringing back relics of past experiences that we have not been able to integrate into a symbolic representation of our current being while at the same time reaching us from the future with an announcing reminder of what we will be if we are not any more, namely, dead. The other who is strange to me reflects how strange I am to myself – reminding me of what precedes and succeeds who I am today. And most importantly, Frosh writes, ‘we do not like what it shows us.’²⁹⁵ Not because of what we see but because of what it makes us start to feel – which is an overwhelming fragility of our ego.²⁹⁶

292 Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XVII. Early Psycho-Analytic Publications.*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001).

293 Frosh, *Hauntings*, 29.

294 Frosh, *Hauntings*, Chapter Two, ‘Facing The Truth about Ourselves’.

295 *Ibid.*, 24.

296 Furthermore, the dislike we experience towards the other person is not only an expression of our fear of death of which we feel reminded in our double other, but also a result of our encounter with a person who for some reason can exist in an ambiguous way in which we don’t allow ourselves to be. In a way the other as constructed in my projective expansion seems to know more about myself than I do, with the knowledge that is not accessible to my present ego being of a temporal kind. Frosh writes: ‘If past and future haunt the present in the same way, as reminders and harbingers of death, then the double is both that we have been and what we will become. In this sense, the double is truer of us than we are of ourselves; more formally, the double, as an externalised projection of

It is this fragility, I argue, associated with the ‘unknown knowledge’²⁹⁷ of the limited existence and finitude of today’s Western world (its future death) as well as the encounter with relics of its past, that the Western subject experiences unexpectedly when engaging with the art of the ‘other Europe’. This other Europe comes from somewhere and might even be venturing towards somewhere that is not accessible to the Western ego – that the Western subject is not able to face – and suddenly the other’s communist experience or past takes on the shape of all the unwanted ghosts haunting the Western world (projection). The ‘other’ who appears strange to me seems to know in this strangeness something about my own mortality, hence the abyss I will fall into when what is now ceases to be – as well as about my past, the abyss I have tried to forget, forcing upon me a historical experience of finitude *and* change that the Western ego seems to fear most. In the following, I want to expand this point on the uncanny strangeness of post-communist art in the context of the 7BB by looking more closely at one particular artwork that was also created in the context of this biennale. The artwork I am going to discuss has been among those that have been criticized and rejected most forcefully and based on the thoughts developed so far the reason for this rejection may lie in its ability to actualize unconscious or repressed material in an unexpected, strange way.

Born in Berlin and after

The artwork *Born in Berlin* (2012) was Rajkowska's contribution to the 7th Berlin Biennale. It is, as the artist says herself, a life project and film – in each case an artistic articulation of the idea to bring ‘new life’ to Berlin. As discussed in the previous chapter, Rajkowska works with a post-communist notion of space; that means she searches for abandoned, open public sites in transition and aims at translating traces of trauma and unexpressed pain, that according to her, might emerge in these sites in the form of new sensual experiences – allowing people to visit and get in touch with these ‘haunted’ spaces that usually cannot be seen or confronted.²⁹⁸ When preparing her work for the 7BB, Berlin as a whole, she writes, seemed to lack such open spaces. Instead Berlin presents itself as woundless and complete, and even the memorials that function as reminders of the Holocaust or

death, shocks the ego into recognition of its fragility.’ *Ibid.*, 34.

297 ‘Unknown knows’ are according to Frosh a form of repression as “‘motivated forgetting”, in which something that was once known is known no longer, but kept “under” and out of sight. (...) We actually “know” something unconsciously, but defend ourselves against that knowledge.’ Stephen Frosh, *A Brief Introduction to Psychoanalytic Theory* (Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 60.

298 By placing new objects within such sites or creating situations that disturb the ritualized ways of using wounded places Rajkowska aims at intervening in the public in some kind of therapeutic way – allowing the struggling population which uses or avoids certain sites to become ‘better’ or ‘healthier’ beings – thus acting in a similar vein as the psychoanalyst or therapist (see also Chapter Five).

the totalitarian regimes before and after the war, seemingly find their coherent place within the city's image of itself.²⁹⁹

Like a psychoanalyst listening to a neat narrative presented by the analysand, Rajkowska suspects that this completeness hides a fragility and a disintegrated state. What appears on the surface is chopped off from another reality that cannot or shall not be seen.³⁰⁰ 'Berlin', Rajkowska writes, 'crushes you with an unknown, incomparable sense of mass. (...) There is something about the buildings' proportions, something in their heaviness, horizontality, the distances between them, in the way the streets are arranged. They dominate. It is difficult to position oneself physically near them and feel comfortable.'³⁰¹ This dominant architectural structure reminds the artist of the depersonalized mass and the fascist regime it used to house and it also seems to match the insistence with which today's German authorities try to cover up or control within the public sphere all cracks or unused spaces which potentially could disclose unwanted realities. These features characterizing Berlin appear to Rajkowska as symptomatic for a place which seems not able to escape its past – and which, being unaware of it, reproduces a similar cold and alienated environment that had been necessary for people to become able to support or tolerate the ruthless mass killings of people who were regarded as different.

This perception and description of Berlin's current state brings to the fore a debate which in relation to the city's current reputation as Europe's tolerant and creative hub is often forgotten. Although Germany is generally perceived (and often perceives itself) as the 'world champion' in coming to

299 See for example how the experience of Berlin as a great city has been associated with and remembered through visits to the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. Israeli artist Shahak Shapira has made visible the huge gap between the perceptions and uses of this memorial and the reality it commemorates, combining selfies from the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin with footage from Nazi extermination camps. The selfies showed tourists portraying themselves at the memorial and posting them on social media with captions such as 'I love Berlin', 'Berlin is awesome' (not original text but very close to what got posted) or 'Jumping on dead Jews @ Holocaust Memorial'. The artist overlaid these selfies with images taken from concentration camps which showed starving Jewish people or mountains of dead bodies, placing the smiling or jumping visitors of the memorial right in the middle of these images. Since all the people who had taken these selfies have asked for their pictures to be removed from the yolocaust.de page, Shapira's montages cannot be accessed anymore. The project was removed only one week after its launch. Shahak Shapira, 'Yolocaust', accessed 20 January 2017, <http://yolocaust.de>.

300 According to Rajkowska the creative and vibrant place, for which Berlin is known today remains trapped in its violent and totalitarian past. Traumatized and frozen in unprocessed feelings of guilt and loss it sustains a culture of silence and coldness while its seemingly complete, non-contradictory, and intact surface discloses unwillingly the fragility it urgently seeks to hide.

301 Rajkowska, *Where the Beast Is Buried*, 134; here another association to Benjamin's work emerges. Buildings which outlive the epoch they have been constructed in can trap a societal site in the past terror of a time that seems to have been surpassed. Esther Leslie writes: 'Benjamin (being in Riga) warned ominously of the "desolate fortress-like buildings evoking all the terrors of czarism" - the tenuous present of newly independent Riga trapped in the oppressive past, whose forces might yet recur in the future.' Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 70.

terms with its historical guilt,³⁰² researchers and intellectuals have repeatedly pointed to the nation's inability to actually confront the socio-historical meaning of its unprecedented crimes against humans and humanity. Most of the times it is not a lack of knowledge or research on the historic events that is attested to in such critiques, but an emotional silence around Germany's past – suggesting that a mere knowledge of what happened is not sufficient to understand what it was that happened.

'We – as a collective – do not understand ourselves in this passage of our history,'³⁰³ Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich wrote in 1973. A collective resistance against a working through of a part of history characterized by a guilt which has been and remains unbearable disturbs the process of mourning which would be necessary to engage with this past emotionally. Consequently, the Mitscherlichs write, the crimes of World War Two have so far not been processed on an emotional level – have not been emotionally explored ('führend nicht entdeckt'). This by now unconscious denial finds expression, they argue, in ordinary everyday routines that shape the public sphere. There 'the other' is not met with kindness and openness but with silence.³⁰⁴ Almost forty years later, sociologists and historians continue to attest to this resistance towards an emotional processing of Germany's violent history describing it as a 'defensive traumatic silence.'³⁰⁵ This silence impedes, Schwab argues, the recognition of any emotional reaction associated with memories of Germany's recent past, that continue shaping the constitution of societal and political life in Germany today. The 'world champion' of remembering with its numerous memorial sites, history museums, and educational programmes on the history of the Second World War, is hence trying to hide, it seems, that the wounds marking its site have never stopped bleeding – the sudden and unexpected loss of the prospect for a Third Reich and the violence driving such a vision never completely digested or understood – millions of deaths never really mourned – engulfing German society in a 'traumatic foreclosure of mourning.'³⁰⁶

W. G. Sebald has made a similar point when referring specifically to the experience of the area bombings between 1943 and 1945. He observed that the devastating air war on Germany in the last phase of the world war provoked little or dubious attempts to document and analyze this experience

302 I am borrowing the expression of Germany as 'world champion' in coming to terms with its historical guilt from Olaf Jensen and his talk which he gave on the 50th anniversary of ARSP in Coventry in 2011.

303 Alexander Mitscherlich and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (Munich: R Piper and Co, 1973), 8.

304 Ibid.

305 Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 13.

306 Ibid., 15.

relative to the scale of material and moral destruction that it caused. It therefore seems as if this extreme confrontation with destruction and loss (loss of loved ones but also of a fascist world view or Aryan identity) has strangely left no traces of pain in the tissue of individual and collective minds or bodies. At the same time, however, Sebald argues, it is this experience of destruction, the experience of unprocessed past collective pain, which binds today's German identity together more than any other development in post-war Germany while simultaneously escaping any representation in the public sphere (uncanny). For Sebald the reconstruction of post-war Germany, unprecedented in its speed and scale, was hence a reconstruction of a 'new, *faceless reality* (*gesichtslose Wirklichkeit*), pointing the population exclusively towards the future and enjoining on it silence about the past.³⁰⁷ Everything in this faceless Germany is, unconsciously, attuned to an individual and collective amnesia that prevents a sensual understanding of the human and political meaning of Germany's past – and this, one must add, despite the ever-present representation of the event of the Holocaust in conscious enunciations.

This emotional silence, the bit that makes German narratives on the Holocaust and the war appear as almost too complete and despite their painful content as, in a way, too clean, is the societal material that Rajkowska's artwork *Born in Berlin* intends to intervene in. While scientific, literary, or artistic works in Germany have often tended to circumvent (unconsciously) this sensual gap in the collective and individual mind, Rajkowska, as a 'foreigner' to this socio-political site, seems to step or stumble right into it. In order to confront this silence and open it up, Rajkowska's art project *Born in Berlin* sets out to challenge Germany's demonstrations of unity and completeness with what the artist regards as their strongest counterpoint – namely the unexpectedness of a new life.

Being pregnant when exploring Berlin's public places she therefore decides to give birth to her daughter Rosa in Berlin, 'planting (her)' as she writes 'into the German cultural and historical soil' which in her view lacks precisely this ability to start anew.³⁰⁸ A video diary assembled into an artistic film documents and explores the different stages and dimensions of the artist's decision to give birth in Berlin. A decision which we see in the context of this artwork as shaping, influencing, and changing both – the city which Rajkowska perceives as anonymous and depersonalized is symbolically merged or fused with the intimacy and fragility of a single newborn body. The life history of this new body, on the other hand, is given a beginning line in its incipient narrative as a

307 Winfried Georg Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), 7.

308 Joanna Rajkowska, 'Born in Berlin', accessed 18 December 2014, <http://www.rajkowska.com/en/filmy/266>; the film *Born in Berlin* can be accessed here.

life that began ‘in Berlin’. Any static borders between the public and private sphere are brought into motion, with the most intimate placed at the centre of the public/political while the historical context and its name (Berlin) into which one is born appears as a central element in a person’s life story. The place you are born matters in regards to who you will become. At the same time each public place depends on constant new, intimate, and fragile beginnings if it wants to stay alive.

Only 13 years after the end of World War Two Hannah Arendt famously made a passionate case for the human capacity to begin, which she saw as the inherent human ability to be and create – the ability to become the agent of something new and unexpected. Pushing strongly against the, at that time, dominant presence of destruction and death, Arendt emphasized that the ability to begin was the strongest counterforce to the constant danger of a return of totalitarianism. ‘The miracle,’ she writes, ‘that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, “natural” ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted.’³⁰⁹ Politics, for Arendt, was therefore happening every time something new was thrown into a world, preventing it from following blindly ‘the law of mortality which is the most certain and the only reliable law of a life spent between birth and death.’³¹⁰ Beginning something anew, a principle inherently interlinked with the emergence of the individual body, is hence to be understood as an act that, as the art critic Verwoert writes in relation to Rajkowska’s artwork, tends to always defy ‘the attempts to administer life demographically or exploit it biopolitically, and therefore continues to create a shimmer of hope on the horizon of the political.’³¹¹ If people however stop acting as newcomers or lose the ability to recognize the innovative force of the birth of something or someone new, in other words if human beings and their particular lives and words become increasingly superfluous, then destruction and total control, the ‘banality of radical evil’, will find their natural path.³¹²

Arendt’s conceptualization of natality as the central political category within modern societies did not refer directly to the event of childbirth. Her notion of action and birth, of starting something new, was directed towards the idea of a ‘linguistic birth’ in the public sphere, of expressing and spreading unexpected words and hence preventing societal life from settling within the automated and deadly machinery and ideology of totalitarian mechanisms. In that sense a linguistic birth was

309 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd Revised edition edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 247.

310 *Ibid.*, 246.

311 Jan Verwoert, ‘Dedicated to the Polis’, accessed 21 April 2015, <http://www.rajkowska.com/en/teksty/270>.

312 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, N.Y: Penguin Classics, 2006); Peg Birmingham, ‘Holes of Oblivion: The Banality of Radical Evil’, *Hypatia* 18, no. 1 (2003): 80–103.

to be understood as a birth of a 'political self'.³¹³ But many critical and feminist readers of Arendt's concept of natality have stressed that the embodied event of childbirth and the parental/maternal experience of having to adjust to the unexpectedness and the fragility of a new life are not separable from what Arendt saw as the human capability to throw new words and concepts into the world of public life. Kristeva, for example, has extensively elaborated how the impurity of new beginnings, their lack of respect for existing borders and established meanings, is within a Freudian schema strongly signified in the maternal body.³¹⁴ In the psychic life of a person this maternal, abject body is therefore always associated with an ambiguity of disintegration, on the one hand, and a simultaneous source of the heterogeneity existing at the heart of life/the self – always disintegration of what is and opening up towards an unknown heterogeneity at the same time.³¹⁵

The capacity for new beginnings as the birth of a new self and hence the ability to exist at the passageway/threshold between one's own physiology/being and that of a new body or self, between who or what is and the other who is in the process of becoming, is therefore for both thinkers, Arendt and Kristeva, strongly associated with feminine structures; not reduced to women or to those who see themselves as such, but nevertheless symbolically associated with female (looking) bodies, which, as Jacqueline Rose writes, 'always potentially (are) the bearers of new life.'³¹⁶ Women or female bodies therefore turn into guardians of the unpredictability as well as the uncertainty that accompanies new beginnings. 'One reason women are often so hated,' to quote Rose again, 'is because of their ability to force to the surface of the everyday parts of their inner life – its visceral reality, its stubborn unruliness – which in the normal course of our exchanges we like to think we have subdued.'³¹⁷ It is thus this abject unruliness of beginning to say something that cannot be said, its raw, contradictory and often impure sound, taste or feel, associated with the physiology of a life bearing, female body, which is what often is being rejected or maltreated by those who only want to hear repeated and see confirmed what already exists.

In Rajkowska's art project *Born in Berlin* we see this female body in its pregnant, deformed state (embodiment of the human ability to start anew) confronting or exposed to various sites of the

313 Birmingham, 'Holes of Oblivion: The Banality of Radical Evil', 90.

314 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*; Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt* (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2003).

315 For a more recent feminist readings of Arendt's concept of natality that are also critical of Kristeva's link between femininity and the abject see: Imogen Tyler, 'Introduction: Birth', *Feminist Review* 93 (2009): 1–7; Or for a more critical reading of Arendt: Mara Willard, 'Birth as Labor and Natality', *Theology & Sexuality* 19, no. 3 (2013): 227–45.

316 Rose, *Women in Dark Times*, 6.

317 *Ibid.*, 5.

German capital. We see Rajkowska swimming in a swamp which is situated right next to Berlin's biggest rubble mountain (Teufelsberg) containing material relics of the destruction left after World War Two, or diving in the pool of Berlin's Olympic stadium which was built by the National Socialists to symbolize and mark the superiority of the German race. In another scene we see her balancing on the rooftop of Berlin's highest residential building or waiting for the birth process to start while projecting with a slide projector images of Berlin's most popular sites onto her womb. In each case we see images of a maternal body symbolically but also almost physically merging with, touching, Berlin's public sites – its vulnerability and impurity being placed in the midst or above Berlin's supposedly woundless and static urban environment.

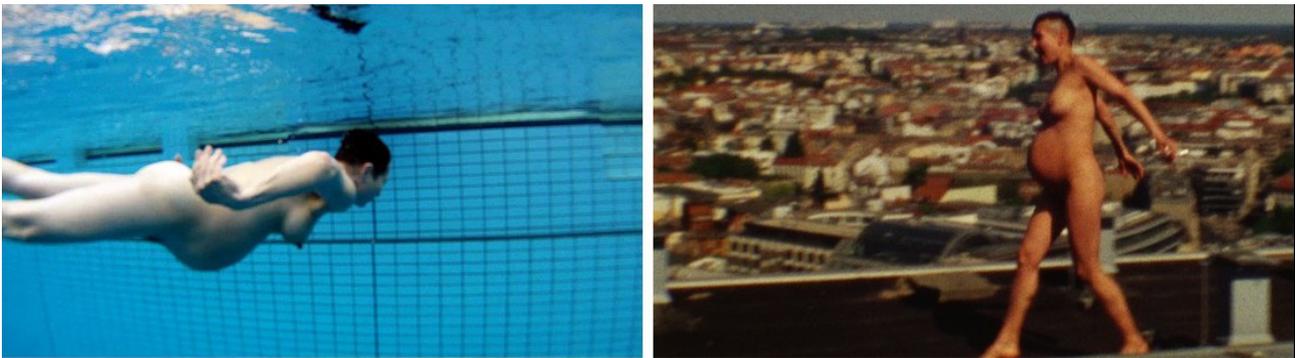


Figure 13. Stills from Rajkowska's *Born in Berlin* (2012).

But we also see the painful experience of giving birth – the abject reality of one body at the brink of collapsing in order for a new body to be able to live. While the first part of the film is accompanied by a lively although blurry background noise, in this part the sound is turned off. The pain and risk of giving birth is visualized while the silence uncannily symbolizes (warns of) the frightful possibility or reality of death in which a birth as the beginning of a new life might end. The revolutionary as well as the melancholic both speak, Kristeva writes, but what they say involves a materiality of expression that is ‘non-significant’ or that does not communicate in a meaningful way³¹⁸ – in *Born in Berlin* the truth known by those who witness such painful transitions is ‘soundless’.

318 William Watkin, ‘Melancholia, Revolution and Materiality in the Work of Julia Kristeva’, *Paragraph* 26, no. 3 (November 2003): 86.



Figure 14. Stills from Rajkowska's *Born in Berlin* (2012).

Finally, in the last part of the film we also see Rosa's tiny and fragile body. Now it is Rosa herself who emerges in places of a city that seems to have not changed – on the rooftop above the city as well as playing on the lawn next to Berlin's Reichstag. We see Rosa beginning in Berlin. But the way this artwork and life project develops troubles a simplistic or idealized image of new beginnings. While at first glance the narrative of the film seems to follow what many would call a 'natural' temporality of giving birth, expressed within the frame of a linear model of time - starting with the phase of imagination, waiting and hoping, climaxing in the precarious and violent experience of giving birth (revolution) which then results in the emergence of a new body, a new material reality that before had existed in fantasized images only (sublation) - this impression collapses under the weight of the film's sudden ending. The film stops by showing a single black slide with the sober notice that nine months after her birth Rosa was diagnosed with a rare type of eye cancer. Suddenly it is not the utopian fantasy of a mother, triggered by the traumatic silence characterizing Berlin, that dominates and forms the narrative of the film but a sudden and difficult breaking in of an un-controllable and un-knowable future embodied in and profoundly shaping this new and fragile life – and uncannily recalling Germany's past.³¹⁹

This artistically arranged and yet real image of a new beginning taking place in Berlin is not a romanticized image of how we would like beginnings to be or feel like. It is instead an artistic expression that takes the challenge of a new beginning as discussed above seriously – hence that approaches a new beginning within an environment that resists any form of radical change in a mimetic way – not presenting to us an image of its otherness through concepts we already know but by surrendering itself to the unexpected turns of an unposited other. In *Born in Berlin* new

³¹⁹ Interestingly, in many reviews of the piece the end of the film is not mentioned and yet it is one of the strongest elements that contribute to the peculiar and overwhelming experience channelled by this work. And interestingly, I almost also would have forgotten, avoided, to write about it.

beginnings never end – or at least they always return. It is always when we think we know what is new that something else strikes us, bringing back to the fore unexpected traces of unknown pasts and futures and forcing us to renew, rethink and relive what we thought had just become meaningful. Arendt stressed that it is only if we are able to experience this (endless) unpredictability and unknowability of the other and the new, if we remain open towards it, that the natural path of fatality can be evaded.

Rajkowska's film is an acknowledgement of this unpredictability of the other and the unruliness of a birth is precisely captured in the contrast between film narrative and the last slide – a slide with information about the newborn child, Rosa, which inverts or questions the whole story presented to us beforehand. This artwork drags images of the most intimate into what seems the most public while presenting this intimate and fragile reality not as a romanticized story of something or someone we did not know and then came to know – but instead, preserving the ambiguous and difficult reality of new beginnings, as the arrival of a newcomer whose future and being will repeatedly appear to us as a mystery – with the other's body and mind being a materiality which escapes our control and knowledge again and again. Remaining open towards this unpredictability and unknowability of the other exceeds any conscious idea of such a task. Instead it requires from us to be able to scrutinize all our existing assumptions – to change our subjectivity in order for the other to be able to live.

The criticism that *Born in Berlin* triggered in the context of the 7BB was in most cases based on ethical concerns. It was regarded as unethical that a mother used her child's birth and personal narrative for the conceptualization of a public artwork – and this even more so because of Rosa's illness, a difficult beginning revealed to the public without her being able to agree to whether she wanted her body and life story to be presented and discussed publicly. But what would it have meant for Rosa if her mother had decided not to mention her illness in this public artwork or to cancel the whole project in face of this difficult and unexpected development all together? Could a silence cast upon Rosa's illness or birth, its withdrawal from Berlin's public, have helped to deal in a more ethical way with the challenges of her path? Or wasn't it rather her mother's ability to acknowledge, capture, and integrate – thus to stand the tension between her imagined constellation and the unexpected and painful turn in Rosa's narrative that allowed Rosa to remain the unruly newcomer she had been born as? And lastly, how can we remain open to new beginnings if we are not able to tell as well as to listen to their unpredictable pathways?

None of these questions had been raised in the context of the 7BB. Instead most commentaries regarded *Born in Berlin* as a failed and unethical artwork, while refusing in almost all cases to enter the complex realities raised by it (with Verwoert's critical and empathetic reading which I cited above being, to my knowledge, the only exception). And maybe the reason for this is that such questions could have not been asked, such complexities not digested, in an environment which as Rajkowska herself stated was precisely characterized by how it protected itself from the unpredictability and difficulty of new beginnings. Or maybe the unexpected turn in Rosa's narrative reminded a German public so much of what it feared most – of a knowledge of its own past or future, of the possibility of a pain or violence it seemingly could not control – that no further engagement with this artwork had been possible. The ambiguity stored in new beginnings as well as the reality of endings and death that comes with the possibility to begin was perhaps too alien and yet in some way too familiar (unknown knowledge) to a public which for some time now has been living, emotionally, in the present tense only. An encounter with traces of the post-communist condition and its contradictory and ambiguous state in which past and future can suddenly change their image at any time and without any prior warning might have truly shocked an audience that is used to being in control over the images and events it is confronted with by the arts world.

In an article on contemporary art Verwoert writes that if you want to charm the people in hell (referring to the particular state of modern societies) then you should give them what they think they deserve, but present it as something new, something foreign. 'This way you don't scare people by offering more than they think they deserve. And you spare them the truth that they already had it all, and that it was bad, since you make the same old seem fresh, right, and justified.'³²⁰ In that sense, I argue, the gift of *Born in Berlin* contained what Verwoert called the unexpected more, a repressed knowledge of life's potentiality or actuality, that if you give it to the people in hell, they become scared.

The unruliness of 'failures'

We often regard an event as successful if it lives up to our expectations. In the art world the expectations directed towards art are, paradoxically, that we expect an art event to confront us with something unexpected – something that surprises us; that provides us with a different view on the world and ourselves. But how genuine are such expectations? To what extent are we ready to allow the art object or art event to have an impact on us – to change us? This chapter has explored the

³²⁰ Jan Verwoert, 'Standing at the Gates of Hell, My Services Are Found Wanting', in *What Is Contemporary Art?*, ed. Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle, and Aranda (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 207.

post-communist condition in relation to the event of the 7BB and its artworks. It has discussed how relics of the communist experience, its forms of political agency, popular subjectivity, or political art return in artistic strategies and artistic forms today. It has also explored how the historical experience of change and the ongoing transitional state characterizing the post-communist condition as it emerges in post-communist art might produce ambiguous images of political agency, as well as of life and death, which to the hegemonic, Western subject seem strange or alien. Furthermore, I have also argued that in this sense post-communist art can be a space to explore and process these ambiguities by repeating and reactivating fragments of past political fantasies and actions within a contemporary environment – allowing for an emotional confrontation, a reliving or artistic articulation/ an artistic reading of these experiences that otherwise seem to be not given any space.

Such post-communist repetitions or reactualizations of radical, political initiatives alongside unprocessed relics of excessive catastrophes threaten, however, to challenge established ideas of what we Westerners understand as ‘critique’ and ‘political action’ - or they threaten to ‘undo’ our self-image as critic, political activist or as art expert. They present us with actualizations of concepts and self-images that are familiar yet different from the way they are usually known, controlled, and enacted by Western subjectivities, since from the perspective of the post-communist site all these pillars of a modern world are caught up in turmoil – stirring up feelings and ideas that are usually set aside or repressed, or that have been missed. These uncanny encounters with the ‘other Europe’ are therefore easier dealt with, I argue, if it is the other, not oneself, who is seen as strange. The 7BB and numerous of its art projects were thus regarded as failed. But if failure is also, as Judith Halberstam writes, ‘unbeing’ and if ‘these modes of unbeing and unbecoming propose a different relation to knowledge’³²¹ then it is precisely for failures that we are looking out for when working with art.

A biennale that is perceived as failed goes beyond what people expect from a biennale – whether seen as art event or as a political intervention. The 7BB satisfied neither the artistic nor the political expectations directed towards it, forcing Westerners to reconsider existing ideas of political agency and art alike. An artwork that is regarded as failed goes beyond what we expect from an artwork. It gives us more than we are ready to accept or it maybe touches us more than we are ready to deal with. These art events were regarded as failures not because they did not artistically challenge the societal status quo, but precisely because they found a way to bypass and undo existing and routinized discourses that dominate the political as well as artistic establishment and thus

321 Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011), 23.

confronted its audience with a reality that was too close to what it already knew but did not want to face. While going through the process of becoming former, of being undone, of having to establish a new structure after the project of a communist state had failed, it is the post-communist site that allows us a different relation to our knowledge of who we are, have been, or could still become – or that allows the West to fail and change too.

Chapter Seven

Missed awakenings and their returns

Encounters with other times in London's known places

In this chapter I use Mirosław Bałka's site-specific exhibitions *Die Traumdeutung 75,32m AMSL* (2014, Freud Museum, London) and *Die Traumdeutung 25,31 AMSL* (2014, White Cube, London) to explore how the societal dynamics of the post-communist site as actualized in post-communist artworks can be better understood through the concept of awakening. I argue that post-communist artworks may cause 'awakenings' in which ideas appear involuntarily, revealing aspects of the past (and future) that are usually suppressed by our waking consciousness and thought. In this sense the two *Die Traumdeutung* projects, similar to the other post-communist pieces discussed in my previous chapters, activate a different type of 'knowledge' of the experienced disappearance of the Jews from Europe. At the same time however, as I will explore specifically in the last part of this chapter, these art projects also remind us in a hidden way of the necessity for new beginnings. In that sense the specificity of Bałka's sculptural installations allows us to see how the ability for new beginnings in the face of loss or destruction is profoundly connected to a particular understanding of Jewishness.

Die Traumdeutung 75,32m AMSL

I visited Bałka's exhibition at the Freud Museum in 2014 together with my daughter who at that time had turned just one. It was a rainy day and it was the first time that I had taken my daughter on such a big excursion without a buggy. I remember this because I had to carry her a lot and my body felt exhausted at that time. It was a Friday morning and not many people were at the museum. As soon as we arrived I immediately started looking for the 'Y-chromosomal Adam' - a black tower that according to the information I had found on the internet was placed in front of the museum announcing its currently transformed state. Being at the museum however I couldn't find it anywhere. I asked the young woman at the gift shop about the mysterious tower and she told me that it had to be removed because neighbors had complained about the noise caused by the power generator that was needed to keep the floating black tube erected.³²² After I had paid my entry fee I was handed over a short description of Bałka's exhibition. In that text it said that 'the imposing inflatable 8-meter high black tower outside the museum entitled *Y-chromosomal Adam* provides an aura of dark foreboding that pervades his exhibition within.' But like all the other visitors my daughter and me entered the museum without any foreboding object warning us of or preparing us for what we would encounter inside.

At first glance the museum felt therefore also quite familiar. It was the museum I knew from previous visits – the same homey environment capturing some living traces, traces of life, of the founding father of psychoanalysis. Being in this place with a little child however meant that I had to constantly make sure she would not touch any of the exhibits since she couldn't know that this home was not an ordinary home. I therefore ended up carrying, supporting, rebuking as well as entertaining my little daughter while trying to figure out what had happened to this place. But the situation Bałka had supposedly created within this museum did not disclose itself to me – at least not immediately – not on that day. I was perhaps engaged too much with my role as a mother – too busy with caring for this new life whose unbound and uncontrolled nature posed a real although not dangerous threat to this guarded historical place.

I therefore decided to focus on documenting with my camera and remembering what I saw as much as possible in order to be able to reflect on Bałka's presence in Freud's house at a later point.³²³ With

322 'Things must not be taken at the level at which the subject puts them – in as much as what we are dealing with is precisely this obstacle, this hitch, that we find in every moment.' Jacques Lacan, 'Tuque and Automaton', in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 54.

323 A mother's way of visiting an exhibition.

this thought in my mind I carried my daughter upstairs to the museum's exhibition room. It contained Bałka's site-specific sculptural installation *We Still Need*. Several crates made of new, planed and bright plywood of various sizes were spread around this tiny room. They were uniform boxes only differing in their size – appearing neutral and meaningless to me. But in contrast to the rest of the museum this specific installation turned out to my relief to be a perfect place for my daughter to run around, touch these non-historical and rough objects that resembled a labyrinth for little toddlers like her. I wasn't sure whether I was allowed to take pictures so I quickly took one of my daughter peeking up behind the cubes.

But although these crates appeared banal they were made to have a meaning. The exhibition leaflet explained that the crates were inspired by the content of a letter written by a German officer, Imfried Eberl in 1942. The letter, a copy of which was available as hand-out in the room, was addressed to a German commissioner of the Jewish Quarter in the Warsaw Ghetto and it contained a list of materials that were needed for the concentration camp in Treblinka for which Eberl had been responsible. 'For the camp in Treblinka we still need: 10m $\frac{1}{4}$ Zoll copper pipe, 9-10 kg welding wire, 2kg of brass wire for hard soldering, 1 zoll, $\frac{3}{4}$ zoll, $\frac{1}{2}$ zoll iron pipes, (...)' The crates spread in the exhibition room of the Freud Museum had the sizes of boxes that were needed to deliver the requested materials. What we therefore saw were objects mimicking the delivery that would have arrived at the camp. And yet the new and minimalist look of these crates did not transport me to the dark history of the Holocaust – they remained boxes, inside the museum, my daughter running around.

The other object in the room was a wooden truncated trapezohedron or a 'Dürer's' solid as these geometrical shapes are called too, placed on top of one of the crates. It was open on one side allowing people to put their head into it. The trapezohedron functioned according to the exhibition leaflet as an 'echo chamber' or as an 'enclosed space' - a space which can potentially produce a reverberation of sounds where the strongest sounds are amplified while the weaker ones go under. Today the term echo chamber is often used as a metaphor to describe how on social media people end up being confronted with opinions they anyway agree to and to explain the success of right-wing populists in recent elections around the globe. In Bałka's sculptural installation the echo chamber was associated with Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholia* (1514) in which Dürer had captured, it has been often argued, a symbolic constellation expressing the state of depression or melancholia which he was believed to have been going through himself when producing this engraving. In Bałka's adaptation of Dürer's geometrical form people were able to place their head inside this

peculiar, hollow shape which did not so much amplify any sounds but rather the feeling of a hollow state, with the museum remaining quiet.

The trapezohedron or wooden helmet was also linked symbolically to another object in Bałka's exhibition. The signifier 'Albrecht' and the symbolic shape of the 'Dürer's solid' were both associated with the video installation *Nacht und Nebel* that was placed at the museum's ground floor. This sculptural installation contained one unimpressive computer flatscreen that was easily overseen by a distracted audience such as myself and my daughter. The screen showed a video which Bałka had recorded in a forest near his house in Poland during a foggy night (a forest near the town Otwock) – it showed neither more nor less than a foggy forest at night. The title and the imagery of the film however were referring to the secret Nazi operation in 1941 when Hitler ordered that resistance fighters from occupied territories should be either executed immediately or deported to concentration camps without any preceding notice. The order explained that such quick and unexpected measures that would keep relatives and population in suspense about the whereabouts of these fighters were necessary to demonstrate dictatorial strength.³²⁴ It is believed that Hitler had been inspired when giving this order by a figure of Wagner's *Das Rheingold/ The Rheingold (1869)* - Albrich (Albrecht) who was able to disappear when putting on a magic helmet/Tarnkappe (trapezohedron). Again Bałka's objects triggered allusions to chambers that made subjects disappear – hinting in a distorted way at those resistance fighters who had been caught in the context of Hitler's disciplinary action and deported to prison camps like life-less objects that were needed to sustain the system in place.



Figure 15. Mirosław Bałka, *We Still Need* (2014) and *Nacht und Nebel* (2014). Photos by Jack Hems, with permission by Freud Museum.

³²⁴ The respective order said: 'Eine wirksame und nachhaltige Abschreckung ist nur durch Todesstrafen oder durch Massnahmen zu erreichen, die die Angehörigen und die Bevölkerung über das Schicksal des Täters im Ungewissen halten. Diesem Zwecke dient die Überführung nach Deutschland.'

The linguistic and visual signifiers adapted in this film-sculpture were dragging thoughts into one direction – towards the direction of a camp – the sound of this installation, underlaying it, however was meant to trigger associative links into another. The video was accompanied by the sound of men whistling the melody of the main theme of a popular American World War Two film epic *The Great Escape* (1963) which was based on the true story of a mass escape of British Commonwealth prisoners from a prisoner-of-war camp in Sagan (today Zagan, Poland) in 1943. The unprecedented violence of the Nazi regime whose memory traces had been activated by the various images and signifiers pointing to mass killings is here countered by the sound of a popular celebration of those who had managed to flee or resist it.³²⁵ Like the prisoners of war so Freud had also managed to flee from Vienna to London in 1938. Today's museum is the house he lived in before he died a 'natural' death a year after his arrival in London – and three years before his sisters who were murdered in Treblinka, the concentration camp the delivery, mimicked in Bałka's sculpture, was meant to be sent to. The Freud Museum, usually free from direct references to the Holocaust, appeared after Bałka's intervention as completely although subtly intertwined with signs, codes, and symbols all referring to this traumatic experience of the last century.

Most of these associative connections between the minimal interventions into this museum space had not really reached me on the day when I saw the exhibition myself – certainly not in their precisely arranged constellation of which one main symbol – the phallic tower alluding to the chimney of a concentration camp and carrying the name of our most recent common ancestor from whom all currently living humans descended patrilineally (*Y Chromosomal Adam*) was missing. But although I had been predominantly preoccupied with the wellbeing of my daughter and the physical intactness of the exhibition rather than with the artistic meaning of it, the dense and deadly chains of signifiers as I have described them here may/must have nevertheless started working in me – without me knowing it – maybe sensing but not liking it.

I remember how I was particularly struck by a seemingly irrelevant and accidental selection of paintings and photographs that were hanging in front of the exhibition room and next to the stairs that were leading to the ground floor where *Nacht und Nebel* had been set up. These images that

325 While writing on this chapter I went with my family for a weekend trip to Rye at the South Coast in England. On one of the trains we found a Daily Express which a passenger must have left there earlier. My partner started flipping through its pages and while he was doing that I peeked over his shoulder and suddenly noticed a headline written in bold black letters: 'My Great Escape.' The article was about a 100 year old former British war prisoner who on his 100th birthday for the first time talked about his escape from a German prison camp in Sagan (Poland). Reading this headline, which I would have not noticed had I not been writing about Bałka's work, I remembered the film tune that had subtly underlaid his exhibition and was now following me on our journey to the coast.

were connected to the other two exhibits by the stairs of the house, belonged to the museum's archive and had been retrieved by Bałka for this exhibition. He had chosen them because he liked them – the exhibition plate next to these pictures explained. Random images that were usually not part of the public exhibition were brought to the fore based on the personal taste and associations of the artist. Among others an oil painting showing a country side scene by an unknown artist, a drawing of a dancer by Max Pollack, a picture of Anna and her father in the garden of their house in London and a photograph of Freud's sisters. It was particularly the latter that caught my attention. Bałka had added Freud's shadow to the photograph that originally showed the four women only, three of whom had died in Treblinka – the fourth in Theresienstadt.



Figure 16. Selected items from the museum archive: Countryside painting by unknown artist (left), Anna and Sigmund Freud (right), and Freud's shadow and his sisters (bottom right).

Freud's sisters had been deported to the concentration camp in Treblinka on the 23rd of September in 1942 – hence shortly after the German officer Eberl had ordered the building materials to be delivered to this camp. Freud on the other hand had died on the 23rd of September in 1939 – with the date symbolically tying the women's death to the earlier death of their brother – condensing Bałka's constellation, increasing its subtle and to a vast extent hidden/encrypted net of meanings – with only the most obvious symbol – the black and noisy tower – having been censored by the conscious world around it.³²⁶

Freud fleeing Vienna – London – Escape by British Commonwealth prisoners – Nacht und Nebel – Hitler – Wagner – Albrich – Tarnkappe – Trapezohedron – Albrecht – Melancholia – Death – 23rd of

³²⁶ Philippe Sands traces the exact route of the transport to Treblinka in his latest book, because his great-grandmother has been on the same transport as Freud's sisters. Philippe Sands, *East West Street: On the Origins of Genocide and Crimes against Humanity* (Orion Publishing Co, 2017).

September – Farewell – sisters – Trauma – need – Treblinka – concentration camp – chimney – phallus – father a visual and acoustic arrangement of symbolic chains all of them in one way or the other associated with the Freud Museum, but usually not consciously triggered by its official exhibition or narrative. Even the title of Bałka's exhibition *Die Traumdeutung 75,32m AMSL* did not function as a description of what his exhibition was about – but was rather yet another sculptural object adding to the symbolic interventions or distortions aiming to transform this site. Again the accompanying leaflet provided the audience with hints about the 'work' done to this famous signifier. 'For Bałka the German title carries significant words and meanings from other languages: English 'Die' and 'Trauma'; Latin 'Deu', which means 'God', and Albanian 'Tung', which means 'Bye'.' The two German words, *Die Traumdeutung*, contained further, hidden meanings in their phonetic links to other languages. Bałka once mentioned that German words had started infiltrating his exhibition titles as he increasingly approached places of death in his work. The figure '75,32m', on the other hand, was the precise geographical information about the museum's height above sea level.

So what had happened 75.32m above sea level? What had the Freud Museum turned into? Was this 'history writing' through the unconscious? A story or history of a place, 75.32m above the sea, that in the unconscious maps of today's Europe, actualized in the associations of a single artist, was marked, built, or composed by a complex net of signifiers, melodies, names, images, or codes, all of which turned out to be in one way or the other associated with the overwhelming catastrophe of the last century, namely the shocking outbreak of human evil and violence from which Freud had believed he had escaped. 75.32m above sea level the Freud Museum appeared infiltrated by material it usually did not show – usually kept at bay. The archive of psychoanalytic thought and history as it usually presented itself had turned into an overdetermined, dreamlike, and yet easily missed (or forgotten) image of a Holocaust memory and the residues of the traumatic experience this event had left in Europe's landscapes.

Mirosław Bałka and the post-communist site

Mirosław Bałka is an internationally known Polish artist who trained in Warsaw in the early 1980s, hence at a time which was characterized by recurring political ruptures and instability as well as massive state repressions as a reaction to the growing political resistance movements inside the country. Instead of getting engaged with political developments, as many artists had done at that time, Bałka describes how the historical situation of the 1980s had rather made him turn inward,

trying to understand, mediated by his art, the layers of his own being and history and to explore the connections between art and society from there. His art projects are most of the time ‘arranged events’ whose objects (sculptures and films) become part of a broader constructed situation in which he explores the temporalities of subjective experience and the complex relations between memory, event, and time.³²⁷ How can we connect (or fail to do so) to past events? And how does our frail relation to the past determine our present being?

A central element of his artistic analysis is the question of how our psychological but also physical configuration provides an entry point to our experience of time. ‘Bałka's own body (his physical singularity but also his own personal story) is always directly or indirectly present in his work, as a symbol for all bodies and as a persistent point of reference, be it in sight or not.’³²⁸ The past as such cannot be preserved or aroused. It requires a body and a historical site from which it can be accessed or actualized. Each of his sculptures or sculptured situations is therefore also in some way interwoven and in interaction with the site from which his artistic exploration takes place. And although most of his sculptured situations engage with the particular site they are being installed at, as was the case at the Freud Museum, there is one site that appears in almost all of his works mediated by the artist’s persona – sometimes in sight, sometimes not. This site is Bałka’s home town Otwock, a town belonging to the metropolitan area around Warsaw. Jews had started to settle in this place at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century with the number of Jewish inhabitants quickly exceeding that of their Polish neighbors. By 1939 approximately 14.000 of a total population of 20.000 people were Jewish (72%).³²⁹ However, only a few Jews from Otwock survived the war and those who did emigrated to other places. Today the population of Otwock counts approx. 45.000 inhabitants with no Jewish life having been restored.

The historical place Bałka as a person therefore inhabits and with which his art is, as he stresses himself, inextricably entwined,³³⁰ is a place characterized by absence and the gaps in narratives and images left by the Jewish community which was murdered during the war (post-Jewish sites – see my chapter on Warsaw). When reflecting on Bałka’s art, Jessica Bradely writes about Otwock:

327 Anda Rottenberg, *Przeciag* (Open Art Projects, 2009), 331.

328 Helen Sainsbury, ed., *Mirosław Bałka - How It Is*, The Unilever Series (London: Tate, 2009), 26.

329 ‘Demography - Jewish Community before 1989 - Otwock - Virtual Shtetl’, accessed 13 July 2017, <http://www.sztetl.org.pl/en/article/otwock/6,demography/>.

330 His studio is the house in Otwock in which he grew up – the art that is produced in it thus often close to a place that stores and symbolizes memories of his early childhood.

Today this place (Otwock) is remarkable for its imposing atmosphere of absence. Overgrown lots and dilapidated houses signal broken patterns of life, adding to the sense that something is missing and irrevocably changed; a new housing development in the neighbouring town encroaches upon a sandy no-man's land where Jewish headstones lie scattered. This is a landscape where, in James Young's words "absence and brokenness emerge as twin memorial motifs." For Bałka's generation, this absence and brokenness are an incontrovertible given, the ubiquitous inscription of painful historical conditions on the present where, of necessity, day-to-day life continues.³³¹

If this is what Otwock is today, it must have been, whether perceived as such or not, characterized by a similar atmosphere during communist times. Communism for people of Bałka's generation (he was born in 1958) and particularly for Poles who lived in areas which used to belong to Jewish communities, was therefore a time profoundly shaped by a painful experience haunting the new communist world from the past. 'Everything we touch,' Bałka once said, 'is coming from the past, it's our access to death.'³³² This explorative gaze towards a past which does not let the future emerge without pressing its overwhelming and unbearable mark on it and which is always there and yet absent as soon as one tries to grasp it, is a gaze that during communist times had been eliminated and is still kept away from the public sphere. In Bałka's art it returns.

With Bałka's work entering and transforming the Freud Museum it is thus also this absence of the Jewish community and the brokenness of life that is being interlinked with a museum site in London. Being in London, at a place which repeatedly denies any entanglements with the Holocaust, one suddenly is confronted with traces of the mass extermination of Jews and thus with fragments of experiences which are usually perceived as not belonging to this place. Although the British government knew about the violent treatment of war prisoners and the persecution and mass extermination of Jews from as early on as 1941 it kept silent about what was going on in Germany and neither did it actively try to rescue or assist those Jewish refugees who could have been saved. In a country where the population had turned increasingly antisemitic,³³³ the rescue of Jews was not a war aim.³³⁴ The recently opened archive of the UN war crimes commission, which documents the handling of war crimes by Allied powers between 1943 and 1949, furthermore reveals that after the war 'some of the first demands for justice came from countries that had been invaded, such as

331 *Displacements: Mirosław Bałka, Doris Salcedo, Rachel Whiteread* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1998), 27.

332 Iwona Blazwick, 'Interview with Mirosław Bałka', in *Possible Worlds: Sculpture from Europe* (London: ICA & Serpentine Gallery, 1991), 18.

333 Colin Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society, 1876-1939* (Hodder & Stoughton Educational, 1979).

334 Tony Kushner, *The Persistence of Prejudice: Antisemitism in British Society during the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989); Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933-1948: British Immigration Policy, Jewish Refugees and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Poland and China, rather than Britain, the US and Russia, which eventually coordinated the post-war Nuremberg trials.’³³⁵ In fact the files show that the cold war in which Western Germany had been an important ally had priority for the Western Allies who granted many convicted Nazis an early release. The Holocaust and the loss of Europe’s Jewish community, which in the UK has been so often treated as an uncomfortable and unwanted knowledge during but also after the war, suddenly crops up in a place where it would have been expected least – and at a time when in Britain racist and antisemitic incidents and crimes are on a rise.³³⁶

With Bałka entering the Freud Museum the Polish post-Jewish site merges with Freud’s domicile of survival, overcoming the geographical distance of the two places by an artistic construction of a new site which leaves the Freud Museum seemingly unchanged and yet transforms it into something else; maybe, to use one of the signifiers interwoven with Bałka’s constellation, as in a dream – Traum – in which we find ourselves wandering through a place that is familiar and in a strange way different at the same time. A house we know well and yet, for reasons that do not make sense to us, it is filled with objects that we have seen or sounds we have heard somewhere else. But if Bałka’s exhibition was a public and artistic version of a horrid dream vision what was its function? What did it do with its audience and what could it tell us about our present being that we do not know already? And finally, how come this return of such a traumatic encounter with death and destruction had left me seemingly untouched?

‘Let the dream go on’ - such was his motive - ‘or I shall have to wake up’³³⁷: Freud and Lacan on awakenings

Freud’s initial theory saw dreams as wish fulfillments (realizations of desire) and protectors of sleep. A dream is usually an expression of an unconscious wish which provides the dream with its motive force and fills it with unconscious trains of thought. ‘A thought,’ Freud writes in the seventh chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ‘and as a rule a thought of something that is wished, is objectified in the dream, is represented as a scene, or, as it seems to us, is *experienced*. (italics added).’³³⁸ The wishes or desires we do not allow ourselves to confront in our waking life, usually motives of an instinctual and sexual nature, return from their unconscious state in dreams and force

335 Owen Bowcott, ‘Opening of UN Files on Holocaust Will “rewrite Chapters of History”’, *The Guardian*, 18 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2017/apr/18/opening-un-holocaust-files-archive-war-crimes-commission>.

336 These lines were written half a year after Britain’s Brexit vote.

337 Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. V. The Interpretation of Dreams (Second Part)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 571.

338 *Ibid.*, 534.

their way into the conscious although sleeping realm of our psyche. Dreams therefore allow us to experience the fulfillment of wishes and confront us with disagreeable thoughts of which in waking times we are not even aware of. This is possible because of a mechanism which transforms these wish fulfillments into scenes that cannot be recognized immediately as something created by our repressed wishes. The dream work translates a latent dream content (the unconscious wish or thought) through mechanisms like condensation and displacement and the use of random residues from recent experiences³³⁹ into a manifest dream content which as a distorted version of the underlying (unterlegt) dynamic makes up the strange and nonsensical environment that we know from dreams.

Dreams are therefore of a profoundly paradoxical character. Although they make us vividly experience a scene which in fact does not happen, this experience cannot be known or explained directly through the images and words (the visions) mediated by which it happens to us in a dream. On top of that, Freud argued, we forget most of the dreams we have and the few fragments that we can sometimes recall seem most of the time to make no sense at all. But according to Freud we forget dreams not because they are meaningless or because dreams follow a structure that cannot be grasped by waking processes. Instead our forgetting of dreams and the common opinion that dreams are meaningless are in each case results of our resistance against the desire expressed in these dream thoughts. Since what we encounter in dreams contradicts and questions our conscious beliefs we resist a confrontation with the dream experiences as soon as we restore our waking state. Disciplined and self-critical analysis, however, can uncover the hidden wish – or at least reveal its most important, latent nodal points – images or words experienced which are related to a range of hidden wishes or disagreeable thoughts.

If we now think back to Bałka's exhibition in the Freud Museum the experience I described was not so much vivid but confusing. At the same time, however, it seemed to be an art installation easily missed or forgotten since the scenes it was constructed of did not really seem to make any sense. It was in a way the exhibition leaflet that was necessary to be able to dig further – a text or a 'transcript' of the artist's work done to the site which usually presented itself in a different shape. Without this transcript the associative connections/associations to the Holocaust and the disappearance of the Jews from Europe as well as the contradictory pull of the desire and activity of

339 The initiators of dreams are 'either residues of the previous day (that) have been left over from the activity of waking life and it has not been possible to withdraw the whole cathexis or energy from them; or the activity of waking life during the course of the day has led to the stirring up of an unconscious wish; or these two events have happened to coincide.' Ibid., 573.

escaping this reality could have been easily overlooked. Especially since one of the objects had been censored by the social environment of this exhibition, maybe impeding a confrontation with the more subtle experiences triggered by the remaining sculptural installations ‘within’. The result was that Bałka’s exhibition was there and happening, but it had become even more difficult to recognize and remember and even less so to understand its content and constellation – as seems to be the case with most of our dreams.

For Freud, the main reason we dream is twofold. Firstly, dreams allow for a temporary discharge of what otherwise has to be kept repressed – they thus have a similar function like symptoms. And secondly and more specifically, they function as guardians of our sleep – or serve our ego’s need to sleep and switch off. While during our sleep the censorship and control mechanisms of our ego are reduced allowing for an arousal and expression of what otherwise is kept away, dreams shall make sure that these arousals do not disturb our ego’s rest. Would these wishes appear to us during our sleep in an undistorted way our ego would be forced to intervene which would make us wake up.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud also ascribes these two functions to anxiety dreams or nightmares. Unpleasant dreams are as much constructed out of hidden desires, Freud argues, as are dreams that leave us with a strange or even pleasant feeling. And even dreams ‘that have the power to rouse us in the middle of our sleep’³⁴⁰ emerge eventually from thoughts that were triggered by repressed wishes. The explanation Freud gives for the counter-intuitive combination of the fulfillment of sexual desires and nightmares is that in the case of anxiety dreams the unconscious wish is bound by the dream work to an unpleasant residue of a recent experience and can therefore pass the weakened censorship of the ego without being recognized as a desire since it has been disguised as something undesirable. And if anxiety dreams make us wake up in fright then this fright is to be understood as an intervention by our conscious apparatus that interferes when the actual wish threatens to become too apparent. Sudden awakenings from nightmares, according to Freud’s early speculations on dreams, do therefore not belong to the dream event but are an intervention from the ego that disrupts our sleep in order to protect ourselves from the disagreeable and repressed thoughts with which we were confronted in this dream. So if dreams have the potentiality to express in condensed and displaced experiences thoughts or desires that we otherwise cannot confront then the act of awakening makes us repress these rising unconscious thoughts and avoid an unwanted confrontation.

340 Ibid., 577.

The associations to thoughts and feelings surrounding the absence of the Jewish community in Europe which were subtly triggered, as traced in my description, by Bałka's installation can hardly be understood as secret realizations of desire. Neither however have they caused in any way some sudden and frightful awakening as for example triggered by nightmares – or at least we cannot know if they would have, had the tower not been removed. In any case, if we 'read' Bałka's exhibition as an installation of a 'public' dream triggered by a post-communist artistic intervention, Freud's initial dream theory seems insufficient to make sense of this particular dream scene and its associations to the post-Jewish sites that are usually not part, at least not in our 'waking state', of the space the vision had been triggered in. But, as Lacan noticed, Freud himself introduced the last chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which he analyses and systematizes his findings of previous chapters, with an example of an anxiety dream, the dream of the burning child, which had made the dreamer rise up from his sleep – hence a dream that supports Freud's main thesis only with difficulty. Freud in a way might have doubted himself that sexual desires were the only source for our dream visions. Lacan has therefore picked up on this tension and used it to shift the focus of Freud's dream theory from 'what does make us sleep' to 'what is it that makes us wake up?' Or to put it in other words, some dreams are configured to make us wake up – and understanding the event of awakening might therefore also reveal something else about the reality of dreams and their functions – and even if the event of awakening seems lacking in Bałka's piece, it might be precisely this particular element belonging to our dream realities that can provide us with a necessary entry point into the artwork's world and potentiality.

In the seminar 'Tuche and Automaton' during which Lacan refers to Freud's reading of the burning child dream Lacan makes the point that the real, which lies at the heart of psychoanalytic understanding, is itself traumatic – an encounter with the real (tuche) produces a traumatic experience in which we are confronted with what is unassimilable, uncontrollable and unknowable. And it is these tearing encounters with an ungraspable reality 'behind phantasy' which determine our psyche more than the experiences and memories we can consciously reproduce and act out, because the real as repressed traumatic experience repeats, returns, and reappears, and it also, Lacan argues, frequently returns 'unveiled'.³⁴¹ But the way it does, is 'as if by chance.'³⁴² It reappears at places and in moments when we would least expect it. Lacan then asks, 'How can the dream, the bearer of the subject's desire, produce that which makes the trauma emerge repeatedly – if not its

341 Lacan, 'Tuche and Automaton', 55.

342 Ibid., 54.

very face, at least the screen³⁴³ that shows us that it is still there behind?’³⁴⁴ In which way, to put it in other words, can we understand the dream (Traum) as a site in which the traumatic experience (Trauma), the overflow of energy which exceeded our means to understand, returns? Or to frame it in relation to the particular context from which we try to explore these questions in the present chapter, in which way can the dream constructed by Bałka create a space for the return of the enacted and experienced destruction caused during World War Two and in particular the destruction of Jewish communities in Poland? How can what usually remains absent in regards to this historical and catastrophic event, namely our inability to know it as the destructive and unassimilable event it was, reappear at a site in which we would least expect it?

Lacan implements his theoretical shift from what makes us dream to what makes us wake up through a new reading of the dream of the burning child. This dream, as Freud wrote in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, was a dream dreamt by a father whose son had recently died of an illness. The father had the dream when sleeping next to the room in which the corpse of his dead child, surrounded by lighted candles, was lying and being watched by an elderly man. The elderly man, however, had fallen asleep and therefore did not notice that a candle had fallen on the corpse of the dead boy and had set his body on fire. The father, sleeping when this happened, dreamt that his son had come to him and while standing by his side asked him reproachfully: ‘Father don’t you see I’m burning?’ In that moment the father roused from his sleep and realized that the body of his dead child in the other room was on fire.

According to Lacan the dream of the burning child is a dream that approaches closely the sensual reality that surrounds the dreamer – it is therefore a dream vision near to the reality that causes it, or a site-specific dream, as we could say by referring to Bałka’s site-specific installations, as well. There must be thus something in this reality, Lacan argues, that makes the dream produce the reproachful words of the child: ‘Father, don’t you see I am burning?’ What is it that keeps those words, ‘forever separated from the child,’ Lacan asks, *alive* for the father – making them return in the dream – and what is it in the reality or context of the dreamer that has caused the return of these words which eventually have made the father wake up? First of all, Lacan speculates, what made the father wake up was not the noise produced by the falling candle (external reality). Instead it must have been the other reality that had been created or reinstated (repeated/returned) in the

343 The screen, as he later states, is the phantasy image produced by the dream that ‘conceals something quite primary, something determinant in the function of the real in this awakening.’ *Ibid.*, 60.

344 *Ibid.*, 55.

process of dreaming. ‘Is it not, *in* the dream, another reality?’, Lacan asks.³⁴⁵ What makes the father wake up is the dream vision – the burning (dying) child standing by his bed – asking him reproachfully: Don’t you see? This other dream reality has however one crucial commonality with the reality *outside* the dream: the candle fell by chance, setting fire to the corpse of his beloved child – by chance. This accident therefore repeated according to Lacan something much more fatal, namely the father’s previous encounter with the real – his failure to understand that his beloved child had caught, by accident, a life threatening fever and had died as a result of this illness.

The main function of this particular dream, and with it of dreams that rouse us from our sleep, was therefore not, as Freud had assumed, the prolongation of the sleep.³⁴⁶ This dream’s function was eventually to wake the father to the words to which he did not know the answer, because he could not grasp the reality expressed in their signifiers: ‘Father, don’t you see I’m burning (dying)?’ The dream that made him wake up repeated for the father in the moment of his awakening the encounter with the unexpected and sudden death of his child – an unexpected loss which went beyond his understanding and which was brought back, in the moment of awakening, as an experience of a missed encounter with reality. The return of this missed, traumatic encounter with the real thus had been triggered by the accidental falling of the candle with the dream work transforming this event into a new dream reality, but the returning encounter with the unassimilable materiality of the child’s death eventually only ‘occurred between dream and awakening’³⁴⁷ - in the movement from dreaming to waking state.

The dream’s relation to the traumatic experience is therefore not captured in its content, neither is it something that can be simply excavated through analysis from the fragments available to us in waking life, but is something that takes place in the moment of awakening (trauma cannot be represented in images but can only be experienced in ruptures or unexpected movements in which our mind is confronted with what escapes it). And our sudden awakening to a terrifying dream vision is also in a way an attempt to come to terms or stay connected with, relive, something that has gone beyond our capacity to know and understand. Our awakening keeps this missed encounter with the real alive, reinstates our non-conscious knowledge of it precisely by removing our sense of knowing and by making us re-experience the gap in our consciousness that has been caused and left by the overwhelming rupture in the past.³⁴⁸ According to Cathy Caruth, awakening becomes

345 Ibid., 58.

346 However, maybe the Wächter’s dream of which we don’t know anything might have had exactly this function.

347 Lacan, ‘Tuche and Automaton’, 59.

348 Caruth writes in footnote 9, ‘simply be located either inside or outside the dream, but has to be located in the moment of the transition between the two, in the movement from one to the other. This is what Lacan precisely

therefore an expression of an ethical relation to the real. The father who survived awakens, in contrast to the Wächter who goes on sleeping, to the painful and excessively wounded bond with the child who is dead. ‘The bond to the child,’ Caruth writes, ‘the sense of responsibility, is in its essence tied to the *impossibility* of recognizing the child in its potential death (italics added).’³⁴⁹ The child’s death is a reality the father’s mind cannot reach precisely because of his love for the child. Awakening, the transition between dreaming and waking consciousness, repeats, makes us relive, or experience this gap in our conscious world.

But yet something else happens or has to happen in awakening, Caruth stresses. The reliving of the gap, our inability to respond or know what has overwhelmed us (that what goes beyond the dream as well as beyond our waking consciousness – being a father of a dead child), becomes at the same time an ‘enactment of the *inevitability* of responding: the inevitability of awakening to the survival of the child that is now only a corpse. (italics added)’³⁵⁰ The one who can least process and comprehend the death of his beloved child, the father, is at the same time the one who is commanded to tell the story of this unexpected and unthinkable ending. To witness the death of his child is the inevitable and yet impossible task the father is facing. ‘It is precisely the dead child, the child in its irreducible inaccessibility and otherness,’ Caruth writes, ‘who says to the father: *wake up, leave me, survive; survive to tell the story of my burning.*’³⁵¹ The one whose being is inextricably interlinked with the dead other and therefore who is least able to understand/see the child’s death, is paradoxically the only one who can tell the story of what it means to see or sense the other, who is part of me, pass away without being able to comprehend and react to what is happening in front of him or her. ‘Only a rite’, Lacan said, ‘an endlessly repeated act, can commemorate this not very memorable encounter – for no one can say what the death of a child is, except the father *qua* father, that is to say, no conscious being.’³⁵² The ‘father *qua* father’ of a dead child is therefore the one, the ethical subject, who speaks, or better struggles to speak, (without words) through the transition from dreaming to waking life – responding through this struggle to a call he can only hear in sleep.

It is hence the inability to respond to traumatic encounters that makes us wake up from dreams – with the awakening being an enactment of the experienced although not knowable gap between

calls “the gap that constitutes awakening” (italics added) (57).’ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 142.

349 Ibid., 103.

350 Ibid., 105.

351 Ibid.

352 Lacan, ‘Tuche and Automaton’, 59.

what has happened and what we can know of it. At the same time, however, it is a sense of responsibility that connects us to an experienced although unknown loss or ending, the unconscious feeling that we ought to know despite our inability to do so – that we ought to be able to respond (the dead other speaking to us and demanding us to speak on his/her behalf) - that keeps waking us up (the Wächter went on sleeping). This feeling of responsibility for or bond with the other is maybe what eventually constitutes us as responding, acting subjects when we wake in fright. Being able to awaken to the inability to know, and yet simultaneously to the inevitability to respond to the otherness of a dead child – the otherness of the dead Jewish community – the otherness of the real - is what allows us to survive as human although not very conscious beings. Neither knowing nor dreaming but putting us repeatedly in the position of the ‘father *qua* father’ responding to the call of his dead child and awakening to a reality that goes beyond what we can consciously know is what allows us to have an ethical, active – and in a way truthful – relation to the real. Using Freud’s words but changing them slightly we could say: “Let the dream go on” (...) “I shall have to wake up.”³⁵³

Deferred Awakenings?

The dialectical image does not simply copy the dream (...). But it certainly does seem to me that it contains the instances, the irruptions of an awakening, and that indeed it is precisely from such places that the figure of the dialectical image first produces itself like that of a constellation composed of many glittering points.³⁵⁴

Dreaming, at least in some cases, is important to allow us to wake up to and experience a reality (truth) which as conscious beings we cannot see or know. A dream creates visions which are interlinked with but still different from the external reality and the stimuli which triggered the dream. Our sudden awakening is then to be understood as a response to an experienced reality produced *in* the dream and as such a repetition of a missed encounter with the real that happened at some point in the past – and potentially also reminding us of a fearful otherness in future – namely our own ending (see my chapter on Berlin). In this sense, as a sudden rupture from our sleep and into waking life ‘awakening’ creates a momentary/transitory space that, according to Lacan, is reserved for the unconscious. A space that makes available and experienceable what usually is kept

353 Freud, *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. V. The Interpretation of Dreams (Second Part)*, 571.

354 Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, 119 (translation changed); Adorno and Benjamin, *Adorno/Benjamin. Briefwechsel 1928-1940*, 157.

away from our conscious life. Can the artistic work realized in Bałka's exhibition be read as having created a dream experience which was supposed to waken us to an event we struggle to understand although we 'know' of it in our waking life as social beings? And if so, why this particular art project? Why Bałka?

Parallel to his exhibition at the Freud Museum Bałka had installed another exhibition at the White Cube gallery in central London. This time I went to see the exhibition on my own. But again on the first glance the transformation of this public site was not recognizable – the 'arranged situation' with the title *Die Traumdeutung 25,31m* in the first instance not graspable. The ground floor of the gallery space presented itself in a way as one would have expected a White Cube to look like. The wide and bright room contained two abstract sculptures only: a trapezohedron and a flat, square box. Both sculptures resembled the installation objects at the Freud museum but in contrast to the other installation they were more clearly identifiable as 'traditional', sublime art objects. They were not squeezed into a tiny room of a residential house, but were presented in the spacious hall of a gallery – absorbing almost naturally the divine aura of modernist sculptures. Both objects were made of grey concrete – the same material as the gallery's floor, making the space merge with the objects it was hosting. The trapezohedron was again open on one side but it was much bigger, heavier, and made of a more enduring material than its wooden counter-part in Freud's former domicile. The concrete square on the other side of the room seemed too flat to serve as a delivery box. It rather resembled a trapdoor – made of concrete, the handle missing – or a grave stone. Whatever was beneath, the entry to it seemed forever closed off – inaccessible.



Figure 17. *Die Traumdeutung 25,31m* in the White Cube.

Then there were stairs again that lead to another installation in the basement. I walked downstairs and entered a claustrophobic, dark space. There the gallery ceiling had turned into a chain link fence

hanging right above my head – in the first moment I could see neither beyond the fence nor could I see an end to the darkness in the room – the room itself seemed to have dissolved. Above my head the fence, in front of me darkness, below me the fence’s shadow. At the beginning I was on my own in the basement – feeling a strong sense of insecurity, fright, even panic building up in me ... then another visitor entered the site, drawing me back to reality, but not taking away the scary feeling entirely. Not knowing what I should do I walked back to the stairs, this time approaching them from the other side – there in a different corner of the basement I heard the by now familiar sound of *The Great Escape* – this time, the exhibition leaflet explained, whistled by male staff members of the gallery.

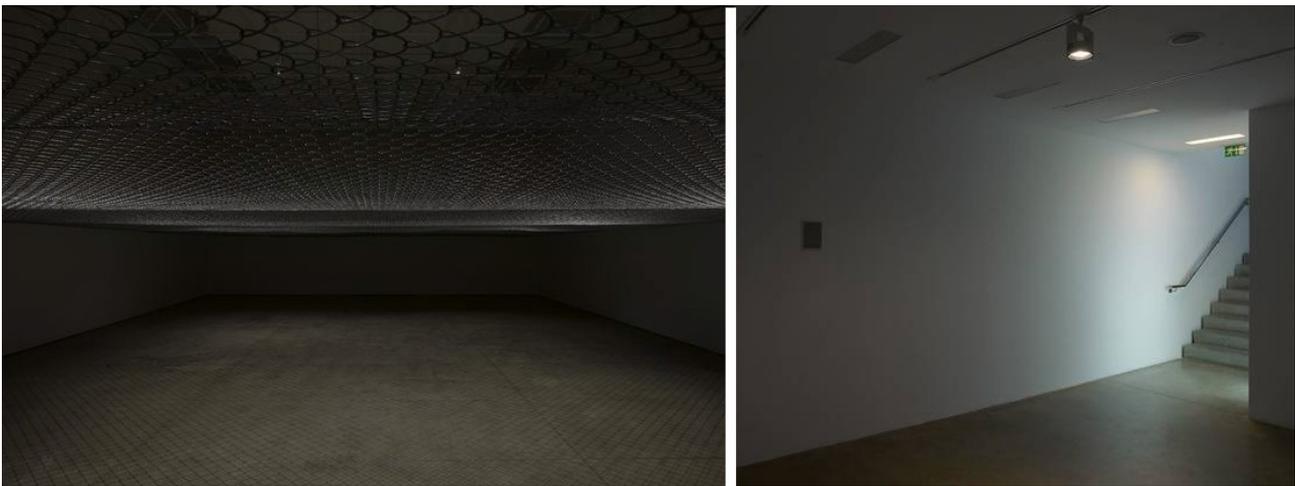


Figure 18. *Die Traumdeutung 25,31m* (White Cube).

The day after I visited *Die Traumdeutung 25,31m* I wrote in my notebook: ‘I walk downstairs. First only uncanny, then a moment of fear and terror. Shall I really go down there? My body is prepared to escape but I continue going, walking into the dark and claustrophobic room which in the first moment seems endless. The end. Is that the end? Death?’

I enter and feel how I am getting used to it. To be beneath the fence. Forever beneath the fence, forever beneath the impression of Auschwitz while at the same time so far away. The beneath was absent from the above. It’s closed up and nevertheless the basis of everything.’

This was my attempt to put into words an experience I had not expected – certainly not when I entered the timeless white cube of the gallery. But in a way it was the same ‘dream’ as the one I had been confronted with at the Freud Museum. This time, however, the dream had been triggered by and created through a different external reality. The same symbols, signifiers, and sounds appeared,

but in each case they merged with elements of the particular site resulting in different dream visions – each of them probably influencing the other. But the crucial point is that in both exhibitions it had been the subtle transformation of the site, the ‘exhibition’ as creation of a new site or reality ‘in the dream’ or *in* the art situation, which had provoked or had the potential to provoke an unexpected irruption of unconscious knowledge – creating in the *movement* from sleeping to waking state, from ground floor to basement, a transitory space reserved for the unconscious. Like in a dream it was the experience caused by a strange vision or the experience of being in a place which we know but when dreaming cannot understand, which made hidden and repressed material emerge since it had been condensed, transformed, and therefore was able to bypass the censorship of any conscious mastery.

For the artistic transformation of the sites Bałka had picked up, changed or fused in each case elements or objects of their specific material reality to allow for the return of the repressed. The return of the missed experience of the loss of the Jewish community in Bałka's exhibition at the Freud Museum in a way made Freud die anew – this time for being a Jew. In his house, which as museum site reminds today's visitors of Freud's life and of how much it was interlinked with the ground-breaking, psychoanalytic theory and practice he had introduced to the intellectual and clinical world, Bałka awakens the spectre of the Shoah and makes it an inherent part of Freud's history – placing the chimney of a concentration camp right in front of his door. The Freud Museum as site of survival has been turned into a site of our awakening to the traumatic experience of one's own afterwardness, bringing back the unanswerable question of how today's Europe can face and understand its survival of this catastrophe. The context of the White Cube on the other hand triggered, it seems, the overwhelming presence of the trauma of the mass murder of the Jews precisely because of the absence of any historical trace. Like in the dream of the burning child, it is not the noise of the candle that made the father wake up, Lacan speculated, but the accidental nature of this event, captured in the child's words, which brought back something much more fatal. It is therefore not any positive connection between the White Cube and the Holocaust but precisely the lack of any such connection that has turned this site into a dream vision waking us, potentially, to the missed encounter of the loss of European Jewry. While usually both museums allow us to prolong our sleep or to stay awake, Bałka's site-specific sculptures it seems were meant to awaken us – triggering concrete historical although hidden associations with the continuing presence of the experienced history of the Holocaust which we usually repress.³⁵⁵

355 The art installations did not trigger an abstract abject experience, a universal confrontation with the real, but a return of a specific historical experience, transmitted trans-generationally and transnationally to these to places in London.

Why now? Why Bałka? Like most of the other artists discussed in this project Bałka is an artist whose art started to develop within the transitory period when Poland went through the process of turning from a communist structure into a neoliberal democracy of a Western European model. Such a transitory state brings up, as I have discussed in previous chapters, various unanswered questions and unwanted ghosts – and it is in art that these contents of such a liminal state may reappear or be expressed. We have also seen that in the case of Poland these ghostly relics are often strongly connected to the history of the Holocaust as well as that the returns of these unladen ghosts can be transmitted, mediated by post-communist artworks, to European sites that are not going through such a transitory, post-communist phase – at least not in such an intensified way. In Bałka's piece we now see how these ghostly relics may also appear, are also present or interlinked with places we would least expect them to. While in the maps of today's Europe the execution of the Final Solution is mostly associated with territories east of Germany, the presence of the Holocaust as missed and repressed reality suddenly crops up at sites we would associate with these atrocities least. These are sites in the 'far West' which we know and which in their function and meaning have become predictable and which therefore also might reassure us that such overwhelming crimes as the Holocaust neither have something to do with the 'here' nor with the 'now'. Bałka's subtle intervention into known places in London challenges these assumptions.

In the West Soviet-type communism served as a 'dangerous distraction' from the pending question of the relation between liberalism and fascism.³⁵⁶ After the end of the war the societal system remained the same, but with the new front lines between West and East building up and marking the beginning of the Cold War, the ideological enemy in the East served as a means to look away from the immediate and inherent dangers within. The defense of the Western model against the communist East had become the new uniting element in Western Europe and a more complex and self-critical confrontation with fascism as a structural element of a capitalist world was systematically avoided. With the end of communism this division of the continent came to an end and while Eastern European countries have been going through the turbulent and painful process of a transition which has stirred up various contradictory memories and experiences for which there had been so many ideological answers during communist times, Western European countries seem to have been spared of this crisis experienced in the East. Post-communist interventions in Western sites, such as the artistic intervention realized by Bałka, trigger however a range of unexpected emotional returns and with them sudden irruptions of potential awakenings to the repressed and

356 Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1992), xi.

unanswered questions regarding the relation between liberalism and fascism that had been so present after the war. These irruptions then do not confront us with the violence that once was in a place somewhere else (they are not artistic representations of the Holocaust), but they disturb the way how we usually relate to the past and therefore make us think and feel differently about who we are and who we could suddenly turn into in future.

When I recently looked again at the picture I had taken of my daughter in the exhibition room of the Freud Museum that showed her in the midst of Bałka's installation *We still need* (I hadn't seen this photograph for a long time) – two striking thoughts came spontaneously to my mind. First, the shocking realization of how much time had passed since I had started my research on this project and how much my daughter had grown and changed during these years. And secondly, when seeing her innocent and unbiased gaze with which she had been looking into the camera then and with which she was looking from this picture at me now, I felt instantly reminded of a picture my father had taken of me many years ago. It showed a 10 year old girl in a Minnie-Mouse dress in front of the abandoned border crossing which used to separate Western Germany from the GDR – the crossing that used to mark the Iron Curtain between the West and the East within the geographical landscape. The picture was taken in the summer of 1990 when for the first time after our emigration from Poland to Germany we were able to cross this border on our way to Poland without having to go through the tedious and sometimes humiliating border controls between the West and the East.



Figure 19. Excerpt of Bałka's *We still need* with my daughter, and a picture of me in front of the former border between East and West Germany.

My father, I now think, had taken this picture to freeze two symbols of hope into one image that at that time must have expressed his sense or idea of history – the breakdown of the communist East

and the beginnings of a unified Europe symbolized in the defunct ruin of a communist border station together with his daughter who would grow up in this better future. It was this sudden and free association between the two pictures, which had made me return to moments in which I had personally been, unknowingly, confronted with the happening of a history I did not understand (a missed encounter of a highly emotional situation which went beyond my understanding),³⁵⁷ that made me start seeing *and* experiencing the wooden crates on this more recent photograph as objects that were actually/symbolically supposed to be delivered to a concentration camp – my daughter right in the middle of them – too young to know what kind of history was happening or returning around her – too new to this world to be or feel responsible for it. As if this personal memory returning in the juxtaposition of these two images had been necessary for me to feel responsible or to respond to the ‘words’ or ‘symbols’ of the artistic dream, I suddenly remembered the exhibition in the Freud Museum in a different way.³⁵⁸ The wooden boxes that had felt so empty and meaningless when I saw them for the first time (would I have otherwise been able to take such a picture?) had now, at the beginning of the year 2017,³⁵⁹ turned into containers of an uncanny and frightful future – my father’s hope inverted into fear. Once again I felt that time had passed – and our lives had changed – this time it was not for the better – and I ‘woke up’ in fright.

The historical force of ‘Jewish beginnings’ - a ‘Denkbild’

This ‘awakening’ to a vision, which was formed many years after but still in relation to my visit of Bałka’s exhibition, contained various emotions that suddenly cropped up in their unworked and unprocessed state – most of which I remain unaware of. But one thought that came to my mind when trying to understand the event of the experienced juxtaposition of these two images was a new awareness of the different atmospheres characterizing the conversations which I have had with my father about communist times and those, mostly initiated by me, in which we tried to talk about the Nazi regime and in particular about the Holocaust. Whereas the former conversations were usually characterized by long, loud, intense, sometimes funny, often repetitive stories describing the inhuman character of the communist regime and stressing the importance and inevitability of its breakdown, the others were characterized by a rather tense, perhaps also sad, but mostly a resistant

357 I remember exactly my father’s excitement when taking this picture – an excitement I could not understand – which I found rather weird and which made me feel uncomfortable.

358 As if this personal association had been necessary for me to feel in touch with the missed encounter captured in Bałka’s artwork – to make me feel responsible for the unanswerable questions this artwork posed.

359 2017, a year after the unexpected Brexit-vote in the UK and the election of the right-wing populist Trump in the US, as well as the year in which various national elections within the EU took place, in many of which it was perceived as likely that right-wing, anti-EU movements would extend their power.

and serious atmosphere – often filled by silence on my father’s side.³⁶⁰ And it occurred to me for the first time that maybe the two forms of communication, loud talk about one lived experience and relative silence about the other inherited experience (a knowledge of the Holocaust transmitted to the 2nd generation of Poles as silence or as open antisemitic aggression), might have been cooperating to deal with open questions that could not be asked because answers would be too difficult. Why the Jews? Why did Poles collaborate in or initiate killings? Why did so many keep silent? And what had been my family’s involvement? Questions which I myself had avoided or had been afraid of asking despite so much talk or text about the Holocaust.

I remember for example a conversation between my mother and me. It took place on a day during my studies in Germany. We went out for dinner and she suddenly, I don’t remember anymore in what context, asked why there was this problem with the Jews. The way how she had formulated that question was provocative but in a way also honest at the same time. Emotionally upset about my mother’s lack of knowing (should she not be the one who should be able to give me the right answers to these questions?) my answer to her question turned out to be a long and loud summary of Adorno’s *Elements of Antisemitism*.³⁶¹ Today I think that I must have sounded like my father in moments when he gave me a lecture about communism, which means very defensive and compulsive – sticking to one position or narrative while being afraid of the existence of others – maybe being afraid of seeing myself in my mother’s place who might give the wrong, antisemitic answer and fearing to confront my own entanglement with a societal reality which still privileged some while discriminating or destroying others.

But besides these returns of changed memories and emerging questions there was yet another unforeseen crisis which had been triggered in me by this sudden image or rupture. It was the uncanny experience of an inverted flow of time – a known temporality made strange. In this vision or screen image the spectre of the Shoah was not something haunting from the past – at least not only – but appeared as potential looming future – and as a future my generation might hand over to the next.³⁶² The story about the Holocaust not told in past tense but in the future perfect, dragging traces of this catastrophe straight through our present life where it already might be forming into a new future. In Bałka’s exhibitions memory traces of Auschwitz or Treblinka had cropped up not in one of the monumental museums in which concentration camps are often presented as something

360 At least this is how I remember it.

361 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

362 See also my comment on Gillian Rose’s discussion of representations of the Holocaust and her critique of Lanzman’s *Shoa* in footnote 230.

not of our time but suddenly turned up in the midst of our everyday and in places we like to go precisely because they make us think of our time as different. On top of this, these remnants of the Holocaust had been converted into objects as banal as plywood boxes in a room of a residential house – easily overlooked, forgotten. The boxes or objects were either too familiar, too normal – too much of our time – or they were too abstract, too artistic to be associated with a concrete historical trauma. It was hence not the radical otherness of the reality of the Holocaust but suddenly its relativized and normalized banality that caused the crisis or rupture as an awakening to some unconscious knowledge we would prefer not to be confronted with. Because if it was hard for my generation to contemplate the Holocaust as an event of our recent past, then being confronted with some kind of experienced knowledge about its potential repetition in future verged on the impossible.

‘Forever beneath the fence, forever beneath the impression of Auschwitz ... I feel how I am getting used to it.’ Awakening is a temporary rupture and is always followed by our resistant and protective waking state. No matter how shocking the temporary and repeated encounter with a missed traumatic experience was, once we are awake we readjust our perception to our conscious world which protects us from the overwhelming and dark thoughts that come up in our dreams. But was that really it? Bałka’s project as having triggered an awakening to the persistent presence of the past of the Holocaust and the inevitability of its repetition?

When describing his method of how to interpret dreams Freud repeatedly stressed that each detail in the dream memory was essential for understanding the hidden meaning of a dream. In fact it was often the most unremarkable detail that contained the decisive clue to unravel the complexity of a dream experience – and of our awakening to it. Suddenly, I heard the jolly tune of *The Great Escape* return. When awakening in the midst of the Freud Museum as a site of the mass murder of Jews in Europe we also, simultaneously, awake to Freud’s escape and with it, as I will argue in the last section of this chapter, to a different kind of beginning – one which, however, might be most challenging for us to realize, since it is hidden behind a difficult journey through horrific experiences which we prefer to keep repressed and in regards to which we find it hard to associate anything wishful.

In one of his letters to his son Ernst shortly before his escape to London Freud wrote that what kept him going and wanting to move to London was the wish ‘to die in freedom.’³⁶³ This fantasy of freedom was strongly tied, as Caruth argued, to his work on *Moses and Monotheism* and Freud’s desire as well as struggle to publish this text.³⁶⁴ ‘Don’t say any more about the Moses book,’ Freud wrote to Arnold Zweig from Vienna in 1934. ‘The fact that this, probably last creative effort, should have failed depresses me enough as it is.’³⁶⁵ Over the many years in which he was working on this text, Freud was concerned that his psychoanalytic reading of the figure of Moses could seriously damage the reputation of psychoanalysis; and he was also, for a long time, not convinced of the strength of his argument and worried that it could be easily toppled by ‘any fool.’³⁶⁶ He therefore hesitated over years, as can be traced in his letter exchange with Arnold Zweig, to share his analysis publicly and was often very doubtful when mentioning this work to his intellectual friend. In London, however, the text on Moses was completed and finally published in 1939, shortly before his death.³⁶⁷

In this controversial last publication Freud makes the following claims: Moses, who is worshiped as the founder of Judaism, was not a Jew himself, but of Egyptian origin. He had led the Levites, a Hebrew tribe held captive in Egypt, to Canaan where he planned to found a new monotheistic religion which had been rejected by Egyptian society. And secondly, the main force that united today’s Jewish community and that shaped the ways Jewish faith was lived, was a traumatic murder of Moses by Jews themselves. By ordering a strict renunciation of drives Moses’ monotheism, Freud argues, was perceived by those Hebrews who at the time of Moses’ arrival were already living in Canaan as ‘the return of the father’ - hence as a return of a strict authority that sought to unite all humans despite their antagonistic and violent desires under a common law. The murder of Moses, as an expression of how much those Hebrews rejected the strict law personified in this Egyptian intellectual, must have then, Freud speculates, been experienced as a repetition of the pre-

363 ‘Briefe: Auszüge von Sigmund Freud - Text Im Projekt Gutenberg’, accessed 14 July 2017, <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/-6433/40>.

364 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 10–24.

365 Ernst L. Freud, ed., *The Letters of Sigmund Freud & Arnold Zweig*, trans. W.D. Robson-Scott (London: The Hogarth Press, 1970), 98 (translation changed). He continues: ‘Not that I can shake him off. The man and what I wanted to make of him pursue me everywhere. But it would not do; the external dangers and inner misgivings allow of no other solution. I think my memory of recent events is no longer reliable. The fact that I wrote at length to you in an earlier letter about Moses being an Egyptian is not the essential point, though it is the starting point. nor is it any inner uncertainty on my part, for that is as good as settled, but the fact that I was obliged to construct so imposing a statue upon feet of clay, so that any fool could topple it.’

366 *Ibid.*

367 Two of the three chapters were published as articles before Freud’s escape to London in the psychoanalytic journal *Imago* in 1937. What I want to highlight here is, however, Freud’s experience of writing this work: his struggle to develop and formulate the argument, his hesitations about the published articles, and finally, as I show below, his sensation of completing an intellectual journey in the form of a published book once he had settled in London.

historical patricide, which, according to Freud, was the unconscious force behind human civilization.³⁶⁸ In order to be able to cope with this irruption of uncontrollable, ‘primitive’ violence against a fatherly figure (authority) and the return of historical guilt attached to this repressed collective memory the Hebrews eventually assimilated the stranger (Moses). They turned him in their narratives into a Jew, and committed themselves to implement and hand down the alien and strict doctrines, which he had represented, turning these into the basic paradigms of Jewish monotheism. In this provocative reading of the Jewish beginning the main force driving today’s Jewish faith was therefore not a genuine commitment to Jewish principles but rather a repressed and unprocessed knowledge of violent drives, which had erupted in this particular, historical experience of the murder of Moses.

If we want to understand the critical value of this controversial and untypical text the historical as well as theological accuracy of Freud’s narrative are not the best entry points, for Freud’s account of Moses has been often criticized as lacking both. What we have to look at instead, as for instance Jacqueline Rose wrote, is the *effect* of the text. ‘Freud is sowing dissension in the tribe.’³⁶⁹ His study states nothing less than that the founder of Judaism was not a Jew and that it were Jews who committed the first antisemitic crime with this crime having become the compulsive force for their own semitic faith and identity.³⁷⁰ At the same time, however, *Moses and Monotheism* is not an attack on Jewish monotheistic faith per se – in fact Freud stresses in his text repeatedly the progressive elements of a monotheistic religion in contrast to the non-intellectual, polytheistic beliefs and also criticizes the Christian transformation of Judaic faith.³⁷¹ Neither rejection of the Jewish nation nor an unconditional confirmation of it, Freud’s last work should therefore be read as a courageous plea for a ‘different model of nationhood.’³⁷² A model which envisioned nations that, on the one hand, would ‘look for less rigid, potentially abject forms of psychic and spiritual cohesion,’³⁷³ while on the other hand, we have to add, were able and willing to embrace the principles of a life directed towards truth and justice – principles which according to Freud have been so far preserved and cultivated mostly by the Jewish people, while they have been rejected and

368 Jan Assmann, ‘Der Fortschritt in Der Geistigkeit. Freuds Konstruktion Des Judentums’, *Psyche*, no. 2 (2002): 161.

369 Jacqueline Rose, *The Last Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007), 78.

370 See also: Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (London; New York: Verso, 2004); and Jacqueline Rose’s response to Said: Jacqueline Rose, ‘Response to Edward Said’, in *Freud and the Non-European* (London; New York: Verso, 2004).

371 Christianity, according to Freud, was a reversion of the most radical and emancipatory claims of Judaic monotheism and as such had become an institutionalized form of the anti-intellectual and antisemitic response Jews had to face ever since. For a critique of Freud’s assessment of a Christian adaptation of monotheism as anti-intellectual development see: Assmann, ‘Der Fortschritt in Der Geistigkeit. Freuds Konstruktion Des Judentums’.

372 Rose, *The Last Resistance*, 80.

373 *Ibid.*

violently repressed, as the continuous antisemitism showed, by others – especially by Christian cultures.

The question that presses for an answer is then how does Freud manage to maintain the tension between his challenge of traditional/orthodox Jewish nationhood in particular as well as nationhood more generally,³⁷⁴ while at the same time defending the principle ideas of a monotheistic structure as it has been preserved by Jewish people. To answer this question a thought image, a *Denkbild*, contained in Freud's account and often overseen in readings of *Moses and Monotheism* but emerging more strongly in the context of Bałka's artistic constellation and its symbols, can be helpful.

While one crucial element for the implementation and preservation of Jewish monotheistic faith had been the traumatic experience caused by the murder of Moses, another historical force, which according to Freud 'essentially' ensured the preservation of a monotheistic god and therefore of a potential intellectualization of human life/humanity in future, had been the force driving the Levites. The Hebrews who Moses had freed from Egypt had managed to hold on over centuries to the Mosaic doctrine, so that this doctrine eventually 'became the permanent content of the Jewish religion.'³⁷⁵ In contrast to other tribes (including other Hebrew tribes) the Levites had therefore become able to embrace the strict doctrines despite the huge intellectual transformation and control of instinctual desire these new laws required. And what distinguished the situation of the Levites from the one of other Hebrew tribes was, as Freud repeatedly stresses, their experience of the exodus – hence their move from a state of captivity towards a state of freedom – or from one place to another. Having experienced captivity and historical coercion while also having witnessed the process of a liberation from it must have therefore changed something in the psychic and collective being of these people. The Jewish beginning, as constructed by Freud, is thus twofold: on one side, it was driven by the need to repress the traumatic murder, on the other side, it was a result of a processual comprehension of a new order (the monotheistic structure built around the principles of truth and justice) which initially seemed unrealizable for it worked against what people wanted and

374 Freud confronts us, as Said has argued, with the limits of communal identities more generally. Communal identity as understood and practiced in the form of national identity or nationhood does not tolerate non-identity or otherness at its core. Neither does it tolerate the violent act of a murder, the destruction of a feared restrictive, societal force, as the founding event for its own existence. Freud's 'meditations and insistence on the non-European from a Jewish point of view' thus show us that for each communal identity 'there are limits that prevent it from being fully incorporated into one, and only one, Identity.' Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, 72.

375 Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (London: Hogarth Press, 1939), 83.

were able to believe, but which under the circumstances of the exodus had eventually been internalized and accepted.

Under the circumstances of the exodus the ‘lack in understanding’ triggered by the idea of a monotheistic, abstract god, itself a traumatic encounter, had produced a different reality, which was expressed in an ability to think and live the previously unthinkable or unlivable idea of ‘a life of truth and justice.’³⁷⁶ When confronted with an impossible, overwhelming idea the experience of *moving* from a place that urges us to repress this idea towards another might turn the felt impossibility or instability of this idea into something that could become potentially possible. It is therefore in Freud’s account of the spiritual experience of the Levites, I argue, that we find a description of his own exodus to London – and eventually a description or an image of the ‘exodus’, the moving from a state of captivity and repression towards a place of freedom, that psychoanalysis meant to him.

The argument and idea Freud had not felt confident with while still living in Vienna had been revived by new pleasure and energy once he settled in London. ‘I am enjoying writing the third part of *Moses*,’ Freud wrote to Arnold Zweig shortly after his arrival in London.³⁷⁷ What he previously struggled with presenting to the public had finally been uttered in a complete publication. And in Freud’s uttered words Jewishness was constructed and simultaneously enacted not as a continuity and preservation of an ethnic identity, but as a break with past identities or fantasized historical origins for the sake of an unknown truth or an unknown model of a different nationhood in future; a nationhood that would not be based on common narratives or on principles of unity, but which would be created in actions that make us confront what cannot be faced (real).

It is in this way that psychoanalysis can be understood as a Jewish science in which the possibility of truth and justice lies (always and again) in what cannot be said – in what does not confirm but disturbs our feeling of being at home. Becoming able to know, through analysis and (self)critical thought, what before could not be faced, the act of departing from a place that was known but that in order to be able to maintain its identity had to repress any new and radical knowledge (keep it captivated – Egypt/Vienna), is the messianic image of freedom captured in Freud’s own

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 81.

³⁷⁷ Freud, *The Letters of Sigmund Freud & Arnold Zweig*, 163. He continues: ‘Just half an hour ago the post brought me a letter from a young American Jew imploring me not to deprive our poor unhappy people of the one consolation remaining to them in their misery. The letter was friendly and well intentioned but what an overestimation! Can one really believe that my arid treatise would destroy the belief of a single person brought up by heredity and training in the faith, even if it were to come his way?’

understanding of Jewishness and the process that accompanied the publication of his last work. Saying the unsayable (becoming able to reason through mourning), neither passive nor active but the *process* of passing from a passive to an active role, means opening up the future against the unconscious repetition of the ever same – trauma. Taking or moving his repressed or fragile thoughts on Moses and the Jews to London, where they finally could be completed, may be thus seen as an image of a life directed towards truth more generally – and hence of a profoundly Jewish life – at least if seen through Freud’s ‘non-Jewish’ understanding of Jewishness.³⁷⁸

It is in this sense that we awaken to various overwhelming and unexpected realities when waking in fright at the Freud Museum. Not only a repeated confrontation with the genocide, the loss of the Jewish community, but also to a simultaneous reminder of a need of new beginnings – namely the necessity and struggle of a stepping out of captivity by becoming able to say the unexpected/unsayable – the new and hence vulnerable, yet self-aware and active, interventionist or ‘speculative’ word uttered from a new position or changed location. We have been placed within a historical narrative and identity (historical determination), but we do not have to remain on its path. It is this modern, Arendtian notion of a confrontation with or an embracement of a ‘new beginning’ against and in tension with the captivity of the old and existing that defines Freud’s re-creation or re-construction of Jewishness. Awakening to this dream vision in the Freud Museum therefore does not only entail the necessity and simultaneous impossibility (its traumatic character) of a confrontation with death and destruction, a non-conscious acting out of a missed encounter in the past, but means also to become able to respond to, confront oneself with, and take on responsibility for the new word about this past which should be always aimed at changing our present structure into something more just and truthful in the future.³⁷⁹

Awakening is a repeated attempt to understand what overwhelms – and as such, as I have tried to show, it can be understood as a movement which drags us from a place of captivity (repression or repetition of the ever same) and unmourned losses towards truth and justice – or towards the attempted new word. Awakenings therefore bare the potential for renegotiations between the self and the world – or the self and the other. They are transient states of being which only exist in movement: in our struggle to grasp the impossible thought and to become able to tell the story one

378 Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew. And Other Essays*.

379 My reading of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* and of the notion of awakening therefore differs from Caruth’s reading. I stress that the position of the unharmed survivor into which history repeatedly places us does not preclude all representation (Ruth Leys’ critique of Caruth), but can be the motor for moving towards the new, political word. The new word not as final overcoming or full integration of the unsayable or uncanny, but as temporary expression of the irruption of the unconscious, and with this as a change of our conscious thought.

couldn't tell before. Looking back at my two pictures, this notion of temporary awakening as some form of freedom is not captured in either of the two pictures. 'Freedom'³⁸⁰ cannot be represented in one image (like my father may have tried to capture his sense of freedom in the picture he took of me) or lived in fixed identities. It is nothing we can inherit – not a legacy which we can simply follow. It is never secured, never achieved or accomplished for good, but a repeated struggle against resistances or defenses from within and the outside. Freedom as thought's struggle with what cannot be said should thus be understood as an ethical state of being that functions as a tool of political agency. Not knowing who one is (identity) nor rejecting the possibility of knowledge and truth in general but putting oneself constantly in the position of trying to say what escapes our conscious knowledge of ourselves and others is what is in profound opposition to the fascist realities in today's Europe – not embracing neither simply accepting the place that has been imposed on us by historical coercion, but *migrating*, again and again, towards another.

Bałka's subtle but complex sculptures which transform familiar places into uncanny sites allow for such an ambiguous experience of awakening. An unexpected confrontation with the overwhelming violence and destruction of the Holocaust is triggered alongside simultaneous reminders of the necessity of a more truthful and just future that may become possible every time we seek to comprehend what escapes our knowledge. In psychoanalysis the awareness for something immanent that cannot be said or grasped, a 'too muchness', an internal excess or tension which is present but cannot be known, 'bears witness to a spiritual and moral calling, a pressure toward self-transformation toward "goodness".'³⁸¹ By confronting us with relics of a past that continues overwhelming us while simultaneously pulling us into the direction of Freud's psychoanalytic 'escape' as a movement towards freedom, Bałka's artistic situations create a space for the word that attempts to speak about what cannot be said. They can make us talk about the past in words never used before – acknowledge a guilt one did not feel guilty for – or forgive and appease a transgression by becoming able to listen to some else's words emotionally. The liminal character of post-communist art as an expression of the socio-historical material of the post-communist condition allows this art to trigger encounters or dreams which we have learned to repress or ignore. To see post-communist artworks as dreams, however, does not mean to see them as encrypted maps that could show us the way to a hidden unconscious truth which could be revealed once and for all, but neither does it mean to see them as repeated performances of a traumatic experience that

380 I understand freedom here as the mobility of thought and life, or as the ability to step out of repression. Or, as Eric Santner has put it, as some form of desired 'redemption' (Adorno, Rosenzweig) or 'cure' (Freud). Eric L. Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 5.

381 *Ibid.*, 8.

precludes any structured, mediated expression and therefore change. Post-communist artworks as dreams are instead irruptions of artistic experiences, irruptions of awakening, which bear the potential to break with tradition and fixed discourses by making us excavate and utter elements of our past that work against the pull of our history as the repetition of the ever same.

And in that sense this project has become a document of my own experience of and journey through a post-communist transition. Driven by the desire to know what it was that we as a family could not confront but that must have been present all along (enigma) – I arrived at a point which I had not expected to encounter when embarking on this journey. Thinking that I might become able to see the communist experience in a different light than my father had passed on to me, I suddenly found myself confronted, emotionally, with the impossible yet inevitable demand to do justice to those who perished in or survived the Holocaust. Not as something completed but as a task waiting to be accomplished. To find words that might help those who struggle to face the reality of the Holocaust and to listen to its testimonies through which this missed and therefore threatening past can be comprehended. And maybe it is in this way that communism, the better and more just community we hopefully all desire, might become possible one day.

Conclusion

... about storks and other migrating people

I am writing these concluding words from Poland. Whilst struggling to find the right entry to the end of this thesis, it is a short day trip to the Polish countryside that comes to my help. My parents and I are driving to a village called Cecenowo. In the other car are my cousins and my daughter. Cecenowo is a small Kashubian village in the Pomeranian province in northern Poland and until the end of the Second World War it belonged like the whole Western part of this province to those regions of today's Poland that were under German administration. In the 1920s 99.5% of the nearly 600 inhabitants were German protestants – the remaining three were catholics.³⁸² By the end of the Second World War the village was occupied by the Soviet army and was soon taken over by Polish officials and integrated into the new Polish state. In the years that followed all Germans were expelled and Poles took over the farmsteads and flats.

We have not come to Cecenowo to find out about its history but to see storks. For many years the village has been famous for the high numbers of storks that settled in it. It is known as the 'Stork capital' of this northern region and in fact as soon as we arrive at the old 'Palace' in Cecenowo, which is a vacant and rundown old Prussian manor house, we see many stork nests – but all of them are empty. We park our cars and start walking around the overgrown fields, take pictures of broken sheds and pose in front of the abandoned and erstwhile aristocratic house. While I play with the kids an elderly man approaches my father and my cousin. They talk for a long time. He tells them how the storks migrated to another place because the villagers had stopped mowing the fields which made it harder for the birds to hunt their food. There used to be hundreds of cows on the fields too,

³⁸² 'Die Gemeinde Zezenow', 8 March 2017, <http://gemeinde.zezenow.kreis-stolp.de/>.

the man tells my family, as well as people living in the estate and cultivating the land. Later my father explained me that after the war the palace had been part of a State Agricultural Farm (Państwowe Gospodarstwo Rolne, PGR) – a form of socialist ownership of agricultural land, which, as he has put it, had in principle been a good idea but did not work out because people were selfish – they stole and were lazy.

Then another man from the village who approaches us when we stop by the local supermarket tells us that the villagers who once worked on the state-owned farm had tried to found a cooperative after the transitions in 1989, hoping that they could go on farming the land. But the treasury did not allow them to do so and instead sold it to a private investor. Since then the estate has been kept empty and unused. Its inhabitants have moved further down to the village centre – and so have the storks. Today, he says, people in the village do not really do anything. Most of them live on social benefits since there are no jobs in this area where one could earn more than one gets anyway from the state. And even the storks seem to appear in a different light. Usually a symbol for prosperity and consent we are told how vicious these birds are, for it has been often observed how they have thrown their own children out of their nests when food was meagre. Life in the village seems to have been put on hold – there is neither any way back to what it used to be nor has it been given a new meaning or direction. I feel reminded of the abandoned and unused places that have been opened up and translated by the post-communist artworks discussed in this thesis and the various and contradictory ‘communist ghosts’ that appeared in those places.

After our excursion to a place that turned out to be so different from what we had thought it to be, we drive back to our holiday house. On the way we listen to the radio which reports on the president’s veto of controversial judicial reforms that aimed to provide the government with political control over Polish courts.³⁸³ It is the second day after the veto and the radio broadcasts repeated reports on the president’s unexpected decision. Before going to our house we settle in a restaurant to have lunch and everyone at the table talks about the surprising turn in political developments. My parents think that the whole story around the veto has been rigged up in advance in order to make those who oppose the reform in Poland, as well as from within the European Union, believe that the reform would not be put into practice when it obviously will be. It is a mere trick planned by the party. My mother is furious and very emotional. My cousin, on the other hand,

³⁸³ The judicial reforms would have provided the current conservative, right-wing government with the right to nominate judges of all courts in Poland which would have meant a liquidation of free courts. The planned reforms had evoked nationwide protests and the European Union threatened Poland with the imposition of sanctions should the planned changes be implemented. Despite this strong opposition the Polish parliament and the senate had adopted the changes and the president’s veto was the last chance to put the government’s plans on hold.

seems more optimistic and says that the veto shows that PIS³⁸⁴ is not any longer as united as it used to be and that people have slowly started to realize how the radical and authoritarian course of the party does not serve the good of the country. But he also says that times have changed and that one has to be careful when making new friends, because one never knows which political position people support. If the judicial reforms are going to be realized anyone could potentially be sued for crimes he or she has not committed. My cousin's wife gets involved in the conversation and says that the Polish people are horrible, that they are jealous and cannot deal with the fact that some people are better off than others. Both of them are my generation but I cannot help but think that they speak as if they had experienced the communist regime as adults – they speak as if it was there, or could return any time.

Suddenly my partner, who has been playing with the kids by the sandpit, joins the table and tells me proudly in German how a girl had started to talk to him in Polish after they had exchanged some words. Most Poles usually, if they can, switch to English when they hear my partner attempting to communicate in Polish, but the girl seemed to have recognized him as a native speaker or at least this is how my partner felt after this short encounter – as one of 'us'. I translate his story to the rest of my family and they all start laughing. He should be happy that she did not realize he was not from here, my cousin says in an ironic tone, because otherwise she would have run away in fright. We all laugh and he continues: I am sure soon foreigners who come to Poland will have to wear visible signs so that they can be recognized as such – we all continue laughing. I think of the yellow stars Jews had to wear in Nazi-Germany and for a moment I consider contributing this thought to this ironic conversation, but I keep silent.

Conclusion

A central claim of this study is that if we want to think about the possibility of better worlds and ethical relations to 'the other' or the otherness in past experiences or future states, we must attend to and speak out of precisely such contradictory post-communist sites or encounters, and their multilayered and paradoxical temporalities, as captured in this short vignette of this family trip. With the breakdown of the communist structures in former communist countries various people, places, and relations have been thrown out of the continuity of history – they have been turned into places or bodies in waiting or have become relations which are shaped by invisible yet present

³⁸⁴ PIS (Prawo I Sprawiedliwosc) or *Law and Justice* is a right-wing, national-conservative party in Poland. The party currently (summer 2017) holds the absolute majority in the Polish parliament and the senate. The current Polish president, Andrzej Duda, is also a member of PIS.

fissures blocking a passing on of experience. Many people and places have remained without any clear purpose, narrative, or direction – some of them for long periods, others for short intervals. Suddenly they were neither of use for the new system that has replaced the socialist state economy and apparatus nor any longer able to contribute to or work against the communist regime, which had once shaped the narratives and images of these countries. After 1989 new narratives, self-images, jobs, and ways of living had to be invented or found in order to set right the contradictory, painful, and in many ways unexpected experiences of the transition. But instead of analyzing the new structural frame shaping today's Eastern European countries, which in many cases has been built around hegemonic discourses and institutional models used in Western Europe, and people's reactions to it, this study urges that we should try to remain within the thresholds opened up by this transition and allow for this experience of crisis to offer us other views on the past and potential futures, and with it make us speak about ourselves in ways we usually evade.

In order to be able to do so this thesis has explored the post-communist condition as a historical experience of disorientation and crisis. It has argued that the post-communist condition as a threshold experience means a confrontation with a sudden collapse of known temporalities and thus also with a temporary collapse of a coherent and consistent image of the modern world as imagined in the West. I have argued that as a liminal, psychosocial state which erupted after the breakdown of European communism, this post-communist condition can be encountered in Eastern European countries in a condensed or concentrated form, but it expresses this crisis as an immanent part of today's Western world more generally. With the breakdown of communism in the 'former East' it is therefore also the Western world, which so often has declared itself as the victor of the 1989 transition, that is confronted with its own undoing.

I furthermore concentrated on finding ways in which we can explore this condition on its own terms, which would allow us to think through this state of crisis instead of ignoring or repressing it. I asked what we can 'know' about the status quo of European societies, their past and the possibility of societal change, as well as about the possibility of different futures, and with these of an ethical relation to the other, when looked at through the residual and seemingly meaningless transitory state of the post-communist condition. Or to say this in other words, what I wanted to know is how we can imagine better worlds or a better future if what we have just experienced is a profound crisis of the ways we have been imagining progress, improvement, and the flow of time.

Adorno's notion of art and my discussion of his approach has allowed me to think art as a medium that can accommodate aspects of this liminal post-communist crisis. Art allows us to know our reality differently. It speaks about aspects of our status quo which escape existing rational approaches and their discursive reality. In contrast to Adorno's insistence that it was the most withdrawn, autonomous artworks which had the strongest political and critical effect, I argued that it is precisely those artworks which engage closely with the societal fabric that manage to enact art's autonomous and alternative epistemology, which according to Adorno was so crucial for art's subversive effects. In order to explore the post-communist threshold I therefore looked at site-specific artworks that internalize, each time in different ways, aspects of the post-communist site.

What my readings of these artworks have shown is that in post-communist artworks fragmentary relics of the past return. Very often the fragments I identified were related to experiences made during or after the Second World War, predominantly experiences of the Holocaust, but they brought up episodes of utopian visions too – reactualizing fantasies and desires that once drove communist or Zionist movements. The trauma of political art and Socialist Realism that had a decisive effect on artists in former communist countries returned in post-communist art together with the radical and political demands of the historical avant-garde (Chapter Four & Chapter Six). Post-communist sites in Warsaw were explored as places which did not only bring up ghostly relics of the Holocaust and of the disappearance of Europe's Jewish community but also made us return to the modern vision that a different world could be created, built or lived (Chapter Five & Chapter Seven). And furthermore, the possibility and need for new beginnings suddenly arose in places and in relation to past events we have learned not to associate with anything new or good (Chapter Five).

What characterized these returns was then not so much their content – they did not predominately reveal any new knowledge of the Holocaust, or of the communist experiments in the East. Neither did they allow us to remember the Holocaust or the communist episode in an alternative way. What instead was specific about these returns was that modern dreamworlds, the hopes and utopian ideas associated with the modern, European world returned together with the catastrophes that this modern project had caused – not allowing us to think either in one nor in another direction but having to dwell in the chaotic and fluid realm of this temporary and transitory state of crisis.

Post-communist art puts us in touch with these ambiguous cultural experiences which in such paradoxical constellations can usually not be acknowledged. It is thus the ambiguous and

contradictory form characterizing these artworks, and not their content nor their images, which allows for a return of the repressed – thus for an engagement with ghostly relics of past experiences that evade our conscious attempts to know who we are or could become in future. These paradoxical artworks allow us to relate to our past in a different way, or to tell the story of our present being differently: not by finding out who we really were, nor by trying to imagine who we could still become, but by becoming someone different in the process of seeking to know what it is that escapes our knowledge of the history that permanently puts a pistol to our head.

The post-communist condition as a historical experience of crisis is then an experience that allows or urges us to think through a different logic of time – it moves us towards the future by dragging us through an interplay of forgotten, unprocessed, and contradictory relics of past pain and desire – turning these ghostly remnants into uncanny harbingers of a future we simultaneously fear and desire. So unlike the spectre of the *Communist Manifesto*, the uncanny force which according to Marx and Engels was haunting those in power and the opposition alike and was announcing the possibility of a new and better societal structure in future, dragging the present moment towards a new state that has become possible but could not be realized within existing structures, the spectres or ‘communist ghosts’ of the post-communist condition make us aware of a different flow of revolutionary time. By confronting us with the unresolved contradictions of the modern, ‘enlightened’ world – the extremes of the last century, the grand dreamworlds and devastating catastrophes that in their dialectical relation to each other cannot be articulated or comprehended - these ghosts urge us to think through the experience of this contradictory modern reality instead of resolving it in either one or another direction. There used to be hope which we have lost, there was pain which we try to forget, there is guilt that cannot be resolved. After the breakdown of communism relics of these past times return – not as separate ghosts one after the other but as an experience of the deep contradiction that is at the heart of modern Western life. As such disturbing ghosts they urge us to think again, to act anew, while making it impossible for us to resolve their contradictory tension into one coherent narrative or direction – and yet by doing so the possibility for becoming someone else in the future is created. ‘Communism’ is then not ‘a state of affairs which is to be established,’ nor is it one ‘real movement’ in society that would abolish the present state of things,³⁸⁵ but it is to be understood as the ability of a society to confront and explore what it structurally evades or represses.

385 Marx finishes *The German Ideology* with the following sentences: ‘Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence.’

Reading art as post-communist thus allows us to change the paradigms of the modern world from within. It allows us for instance to think that in order to create a better world it is not a collective consciousness we have to seek for. If we as Westerners want to change then we do not have to find, strengthen, or expand new or old collective identities. Instead it is in confrontations with what is not known, what is hidden or repressed, some kind of collective unconscious reality, that there are possibilities of changing existing power structures and hegemonic forms of social relations and interaction. This collective unconsciousness is then not to be understood as a static object that can be revealed, identified, and interpreted or that can be made fully conscious. It is instead to be understood as an ability of a society to seek and allow for confrontations with aspects of our reality which escape our control and yet exist. So although the aim is to make the unconscious conscious, to understand what makes us be who we are, to find the new word for what cannot be said, we simultaneously have to accept that such a process will never be completed and will never end in a clearly identifiable new and stable state. Cracks, fissures, and sudden ruptures will remain, but instead of ignoring them for the sake of coherent and continuous identities, the aim has to be to live and speak along or even through these contradictions and to allow for gaps or silences to emerge.

What the post-communist artworks discussed in this thesis have shown is that it is in uncanny encounters, failed events, abandoned sites, and minimalist interventions into familiar places that such fissures or cracks might emerge. It is not the sites that have been chosen and designed to represent and remember a specific event that allow for an emotional and non-identical comprehension of these past events, but rather broken places – places that are usually avoided or overseen, in which people can find together and start changing their perspective on past pain or feelings of guilt, which have been avoided or repressed.

It is furthermore not the strength of political movements, their heroic acts and historical figures, but their weaknesses, their contradictory and painful histories that bear the potential for a different form of popular, collective power. By allowing the image of a coherent collective identity to disappear and to disintegrate within the ghostly realm of its contradictory past, the fantasy of resistance and protest may reappear in different and unexpected ways.

It is not only what we know about history that is the clue to a different future, but the unruly, uncomfortable, unpleasant, or shameful aspects we have learned to circumvent in jargons that have made us talk about the past while simultaneously evading it. Moving, migrating, and repeatedly

trying to speak about what we cannot articulate in order to express in words what cannot be expressed, is the kind of political or critical action that post-communist sites drag us towards.

And finally, it is art, its power to intervene in public sites, private conversations, institutions, or our family relations, which takes on a crucial role in societal processes of change. Art intervenes at a level that politics and science cannot reach and by doing so confronts us with various realms which escape our rationalist way to know ourselves and ‘the other’. Art thus cannot be consumed or bought but it acts upon us in similarly elusive ways as the minimal interventions of a psychoanalyst in the analysand’s speech.

Eastern European countries seem to have embarked on an increasingly nationalist and reactionary path, and many intellectuals and activists have accordingly turned their back to this ‘other Europe’, alarmed at the openly anti-Muslim, racist, antisemitic, and anti-democratic politics that have been implemented by their democratically elected governments in recent years. This study, however, has suggested that it is precisely these ‘Eastern European’ countries and their intense experience of a modern unbecoming which can serve as a powerful source for changing or ‘forming’ the West – not least because what we see happening in these countries might tell us something about ourselves that we would rather not know. In having experienced European communism and then its abrupt disintegration post-communist countries, their transient sites and disrupted relations or subject positions, allow us to get in touch with realities of the modern Western world that usually escape us. What I have done is to create an intellectual space in which the post-communist transition can be conceptualized and thought-through as a threshold experience, triggering such critical and ambiguous encounters with our past. I have further developed a methodological approach which enabled me to use post-communist artworks as mediators of this liminal threshold experience. Post-communist artworks, as this study has shown, bring the ambiguity of the modern world as we know it back to life and it is from these disturbing, disruptive, and often unpleasant experiences, in which images of ourselves and others are undone, that we can find ways out of the deadlock of modern history and the persistent colonial power of a capitalist West. The artworks, which I unfolded in this study, have given rise to some of these alternative routes through our past. Other post-communist artworks will stun us, awaken us, by unleashing different, currently unknown, pathways.

I am writing these very last words of the thesis from the recently built European Centre of Solidarity in Gdańsk which opened in 2014 in the premises of the former shipyard. The centre is a hyper-modern building that contains a museum on Solidarność, cafes, restaurants, a library,

conference rooms, and everything one would expect to find in a Western European study centre. If one enters the building through the main entrance a big white sign says: 'Europe starts here!' Those visitors who come to the centre from the direction of the old town and Gdańsk's main station can easily find it by following a route called 'Ways to Freedom' or 'droga do wolności' - an artistically designed city promenade that symbolizes the gradual process towards freedom for which Solidarność has become a famous symbol. The centre is the route's destination. On my melancholic returns to the shipyard and its communist past I have, however, found a different path to reach this centre. I get off one stop before the main station and walk alongside some remaining yet decaying parts of the old shipyard. Some smaller businesses have settled here and occasionally one or two workers get off with me at this station and pass the rusted bridge in order to get over the train tracks. My path leads me past parking spaces, forgotten yards, empty playgrounds, and old houses covered in graffiti, occasionally interrupted by a refurbished or new building. When arriving at the centre I enter it through the back entrance where there is no sign about the start of Europe. And yet, the story I try to finish here is also a story about Europe. In my story, however, Europe does not begin in glorified memories of past uprisings, neither does it begin with repeated affirmations of European values and codes of conduct, but it begins then when we suddenly lose our way – and manage to think and speak on unexpected and mostly unknown and uncanny sidetracks.

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