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Art and Politics

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In 1977 Herbert Marcuse, one of the most influential thinkers of the Frankfurt School, published the essay *The Aesthetic Dimension. Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. In the Preface to this publication the author makes three observations with the help of which we may attempt to draw a demarcating line regarding aesthetics, the aesthetic, politics and art between our contemporaneity and that time of three decades ago.

In the same Preface Marcuse writes:

I argue that by the virtue of its aesthetic form, art is largely autonomous vis à vis the given social relations. In its autonomy art both protests these relations, and at the same time transcends them. Thereby art subverts the dominant consciousness, the ordinary experience.¹

In the same passage of the Preface Marcuse also points out that his is a critique of Marxist orthodoxy, namely a critique of »the interpretation of the quality and truth of a work of art in terms of the totality of the prevailing relations of production.« He adds that, »although this essay speaks of 'art' in general, my discussion is essentially focused on literature.«

In these observations we recognize three features of what is generally regarded as the modernist cultural and theoretical paradigm characteristic of the Left: a defense of the autonomy of art, a critique of economic reductionism of art, and the focusing, when referring to art, on literature. In the decades after the publication of Marcuse's essay, the accentuation of the autonomy of art has diminished; the economic reductionism of the kind discussed by Marcuse has withered away, primarily due to the prevailing belief that the relations of production and the deterministic relation between the economic base and the superstructure are essential features of the industrial age and have thus been superseded by the emergence of global postindustrial and information societies, in which no longer prevails the »contradiction between work and pleasure«.² Thirdly, literature as the paradigmatic art form of modernism has been replaced by visual culture and the visual arts. As Jacques Rancière recently noted,

'art' is not a common concept which unifies different arts. It is a device (*dispositif*) which makes them visible. And 'painting' is not only the name of one art. It is the name of one device (*dispositif*) of exhibiting, of one form of visibility of art.³

What relevance does today have the question of art and politics? Before attempting to answer this question let us glance at some of the past instances and theorizations of this relation.

As is generally agreed, the door for the modern political use of art opened with the French Revolution, the examples – considered exceptional art in their own time as well as in ours – ranging from the paintings by Jean-Louis David to those of Francisco Goya.

Nonetheless, it was Friedrich Schiller's notion of the aesthetic education of man from the last decade of the 18th century that served as the theoretical starting point for the modern interpretation of the aesthetic, which was also essentially related to the artistic:

The idea of modernity as a time devoted to the material realization of a humanity still latent in mankind was constructed on this foundation. It can be said, regarding this point, that the 'aesthetic revolution' produced a new idea of political revolution.⁴

Schiller's views became the cornerstone of German romanticism of Hegel, Hölderlin and Schelling and its demand for the unconditional freedom and its material precondition. The aesthetic became the template for revolution.

It is along these lines that we also have to interpret Marcuse's accentuation of the aesthetic form of art, a demand raised anew at the time of the October Revolution, a story unfolded by Peter Bürger in his 1973 *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. According to his account avant-garde art experienced a continuous failure to achieve the aim of conflating art and life and, especially, to practically translate the former into the latter: the avant-garde art had to acquiesce to be returned into the institution of art, thereby relinquishing its totalizing revolutionary desires and potentials.

Let me illustrate what the conflation of art and life meant, by the following statement by Giovanni Papini from a 1913 article titled »Why I am a Futurist:«

I am a futurist because futurism signifies absolute freedom, the liberation of historical cemeteries and suffocating laws. I am a futurist because futurism signifies the opening of new routes toward the future and the exasperated pursuit of sensations and new emotions as well as new forms of expression.⁵

In a similar vein went the statement by the Russian avant-garde artists in December 1918: »We do not need a dead mausoleum of art where dead works are worshipped, but a living factory of human spirit – in the streets, in the tramways, in the factories, workshops and workers' home.«⁶

The totalizing zeal towards the transformation of the aesthetic of art into the aesthetic of society met with failure. Perhaps the claim of this failure arose from the interpretation of the »aesthetic« as a state of things and not as an event, not as a process in time, in spite of this being Marx's paradoxical intent (when referring to communism) and in spite of art of the twentieth century being primarily an act and not a work of art (*l'oeuvre*). Such a process can of course never be petrified and any attempt at its institutionalization is bound to fail. Also, such a process is not of a totalizing nature.

Be what may, the result was that the modernist and avant-garde art mostly oscillated between two ultimate extremes: that of Tatlin's »production art« during the years 1927 and 1931, on the one hand, and the museum-bound readymades by Marcel Duchamp, on

the other. While the former intentionally eliminated the division between spheres of life, the latter played upon, and ultimately strengthened, the autonomy of art.

This, then, was one leg of the the avant-garde art. The other was constituted by the art of resistance, philosophically articulated and promoted primarily by Theodor Adorno and, in the American setting, by the division of art into avant-garde and kitsch,⁷ and by ascribing to the American neoavant-garde an oppositional intent.⁸

Marcuse's criticism was aimed at the so-called orthodox Marxism. Michel Foucault observed that,

formalist culture, thought and art in the first third of the 20th century were generally associated with Left political movements – or critique – and even with certain revolutionary instances; and Marxism concealed all that. It was fiercely critical of formalism in art and theory, most clearly from the '30s onwards.⁹

The major part of the previous century, from the post-October period until the seventies, abounded in various attempts of leftist intellectuals, especially writers, composers and the fine artists to reconcile in their works the incessant imbalance between content and form, with form representing the undesirable necessity, for without it the content would never result in art. The issue of form and content was transformed into an issue of the potentially political correct vs. the l'art-pour-l'artistic incorrect art and of the politically suitable vs. the unsuitable one. The interpretations varied from those of György Lukács to those of Andrei A. Zhdanov and carried different theoretical and political weight, but in practically all instances modernist and avant-garde art was denigrated and the critically or romantically realist one praised.

The balance between form and content was found in Walter Scott and Balzac, but not in expressionism or in Kafka. Surrealism represented the ultimate object of criticism, with its denigration stretching from orthodox Marxism to Adorno and Habermas. The safest way to remain dedicated to the leftist cause and at the same time defend artistic freedom was to be a realist, even if this required the dubious designation of all art as realist, as Roger Garaudy argued in 1968.¹⁰

Where lies the cause for this desire towards realism in orthodox Marxism? Was this a position inherent to Marxism as such or was realism usurped and appropriated by it? Contrary to this latter view I would agree with the Czech avant-garde theorist Karel Teige who claimed in 1950 that,

All regimes are inclined towards making realism official, even if in the form of populism and ruralism. (...) Whenever – continues Teige – the political captain of a ship, be it that of the left or of the right, from the fierce and strong current of social events sails to the shore of art – he always lands on the right shore.¹¹

Contrary to the views of authors who in this regard defend the position of a rather straightforward social construction of reality, I would side with Teige and argue that there are elements that are inherent to realism – be it that of Tolstoy, Norman Rockwell or Arno Breker – and that they follow the same logic as renaissance perspectival representational system and photography do.

As Joel Snyder asks, referring to photography – but we could extend this question and its answer also to the fine arts and to realist literature – why is it that we have begun to think of photography as a natural phenomenon? As he claims, we cannot answer this question

by referring to the mechanics of photography, but must turn to the pictorial standards which form the principles of creation of the photographic camera.

These standards grow out of a deliberate and thoroughly successful attempt on the part of Western artists, beginning in the early Renaissance, to construct a pictorial equivalent of vision. It is this pictorial equivalent to vision which is the source of our unshakable belief in the congruence of picture and world.¹²

In a similar way realist – perhaps an alternative designation would be »narrative« – writing in literature resembles the quotidian experiences of our lived world. Realist literary and visual discourses are thus more easily accessible, more »veristic« and easier to recognize and to recreate in our imagination our lived world than those – expressionist or surrealist, for example – that intentionally create obstacles to our cognition and recognition. Realism is similar to mass culture in that it purportedly renders the world more easily recognizable.

But the privileging of realism is but one step towards political instrumentalization of art. The other was introduced by Lenin in 1902. In his essay from that year, titled *What Is to Be Done?*, Lenin distinguished between bourgeois and socialist ideology.

The working class spontaneously gravitates towards Socialism, but the more widespread (and continuously revived in the most diverse forms) bourgeois ideology nevertheless imposes itself upon the working class still more.¹³

In this way the notion of ideology, contrary to its interpretations since its first derogatory use by Napoleon a century earlier, has lost its negative connotation and acquired a neutral one, thereby legitimizing also the propaganda use of »diverse forms« of ideology, such as literature. The notion of socialist realism, first mentioned in 1932 (first in relation to literature and then to visual arts) and later defined by Aleksandr Gerasimov as »realistic in form and socialist in content,«¹⁴ confirms this claim, transforming literature and art in general into a more or less sophisticated form of political propaganda. Or as Maurice Merleau-Ponty lamented in December 1949: »Today's communism (...) behaves as if there were no longer any intrinsic criteria in cultural matters, as if literature and science were means, among others, to immediate political action, which is itself understood simply as the defense of the U.S.S.R.«¹⁵

A similar claim could only partly be made about national socialism and Italian fascism. What was different in these two cases when compared to the Soviet world, was that the former never developed the same kind of conceptual clarity that socialist realism and the Soviet political practice did since its official inception in 1934. Some high ranking Nazi politicians remained avid collectors of *Entartete Kunst*, while in Italy culture was from the end of World War I until 1943 often strongly nationalistic (let us note the cases of Marinetti and Gabriele D'Annunzio), with the second futurism – *il secondo futurismo*, that from 1919 onwards – in many respects remaining avant-garde. Only in Soviet Union and later in the Soviet bloc countries have art and culture become a prolonged state political issue.

It is thus at this point that an essential question has to be asked, namely, whether in the previous century political art had actual political effects or whether the actual aim of political interventions regarding art was not so much to promote politically suitable and appropriate art but, instead, to promote propaganda and, especially, to hinder the creation, dissemination and promotion of politically problematic art. It was the latter that was

mostly the case and the major body of discussions regarding the political suitability of art works, artistic trends and styles was in fact intended to screen society from the imagined or real adverse effects of art – most of which had to do with the aesthetic dimension of art. But, since art was considered to be primarily political propaganda, then politically ineffective or problematic art was simply wrong art and thus either non-art *and/or* (usually both) an anti-official propaganda.

In his book *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* (1989) Boris Groys argues that,

There would have been no need [under Stalin] to suppress the avant-garde if its black squares and transrational poetry had confined themselves to artistic space, but the fact that it was persecuted indicates that it was operating on the same territory as the state.¹⁶

What, then, was this territory on which both the art and the state operated? The Soviet state was confronted by two contradictory requirements: on the one hand, following the tradition of its critical realism and that of the Russian experiment in art and its avant-gardistic proponents, its cultural and ideological edifice was erected upon the avant-garde and critical foundations, the latter furthermore arising from the Enlightenment tradition of the French revolution (or at least from aspirations regarded as relating to this tradition). Within such a framework art, the artist and culture carried a special import. The political repression of art became possible and necessary when art as such became reinterpreted and thus transformed into a special form of political propaganda. Writers and artists in general were thus required to transform themselves into the engineers of human souls. What was also necessary was for the idea to cease being an empty signifier, allowing for an infinite semantic investment, but instead, to »degenerate into ideology« (Alfred Andersch) and *Realpolitik*.

The other facet of any totalitarian society is pointed to by Claude Lefort.¹⁷ According to Lefort, a democratic society possesses various centers of power (political parties, economic centers of power, the civil society etc.), leaving the central place of power empty. In contradistinction, a totalitarian society concentrates all power in a single center, where the political, economic, ideological and other centers of power coalesce. There is no power outside this center and any attempt to create a new center of power is usually brutally suppressed. In fact, *any* attempt at creating something that is not subsumed to the center is suppressed. It is in this way that I would interpret Groys's statement regarding the »black squares« and it is in this way that we could interpret the cultural and ideological policies of totalitarian and authoritarian societies of the previous century regarding the art that emerged within their confines: any instance of social reality that is not controlled by the exclusive power in the center of the state puts into jeopardy all other instances of its power. I would therefore broaden Groys's statement concerning the »black squares« (as representative of the artistic avant-garde) and argue that the autonomous modernist art, too, threatened the totalitarian state, for it represented an instance of non-politicized social reality, and therefore something that in a thoroughly politicized society was not supposed to exist.

With the decline of the industrial society and of the nation-state this type of totalitarianism reached its end. Its demise was somewhat accelerated by art that I call postmodern politicized art¹⁸ and that I find of crucial import at the time when the symbolic power of various kinds of socialism and of the socialist state was withering away: this occurred, for example, when the sickle and the hammer, as in a well-known photograph by the Hungarian artist Sándor Pinczehelyi from 1973, were no longer

regarded as two political symbols, as stand-ins for the peasant and the worker, but as two ordinary tools used in the field and in the factory. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, »There is no symbolic power without a symbolism of power.«¹⁹ When the symbolism of power withers away, its symbolic power is gone as well. What happened in the Soviet system was appropriately described by Jean Baudrillard: »the communist systems did not succumb to an external enemy, or even to an internal one (had that been the case, they would have resisted), but to their own inertia.«²⁰ All instances of the social field partook in this proces, but the desintegration ocured because there was nothing sufficiently persuasive to hold the system together and to allow it a common ideology that people could accept as their own.

Why is it that we speak so much about art and politics in relation to the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc countries or socialist regimes in general? Some of the reasons have been already pointed out, among them the claim of socialist countries to carry on the Enlightenment tradition, and the strong presence of artists, many of them avant-garde ones, in the revolutionary ranks, for every revolution is also na aesthetic endeavor.

What was common to the political and the artistic avant-garde was their wish to change the very foundations of society, was the utopian and the aesthetic moment, which purportedly drove society towards a classless society without exploitation and drove art towards self-creation and self-annihilation *qua* art. These features, characteristic of the early anarchist art theory up to situationism of the sixties of the previous century, are what distinguishes an important segment of art of the period of modernism from much of contemporary art in the First World. I underline the phrase »contemporary art in the First World«, for in much of the Third World the situation is often essentially different, although these differences go in different directions and may in recent years be diminishing. The Second World seems to be in a flux too great and varied to allow brief descriptions.

Not long ago socialism, its history interwoven with that of bourgeois culture and therefore modernity, transmitted strength and hope from its different registers of radical opposition. Without the socialist narrative and without national allegories, what will sustain a symbolic order of collectivities in our imagination?²¹

This question, raised by the Indian art critic and theorist Geeta Kapur, is a query echoed in many parts of the world today. In the time of socialism this master narrative offered a theoretical and a political support for art of resistance and opposition and functioned in this respect as that utopian grid of ideas that have not yet been transformed into ideologies and *Realpolitik*. The master narrative of oppositional art, erected upon socialist ideas, at least in the Third World and in the postcolonial universe, functioned as an efficient utopian discourse that offered a viable alternative in the often semi-modernized societies of Asia and parts of Africa and Latin America. A parallel to this tandem is that of western and orthodox Marxism where the latter, in spite of having institutional support of the Soviet state, never achieved an academic and international recognition, but functioned as pure operative ideology for quotidian application in various cultural situations. Western Marxism, on the contrary, served – and still serves – as a persuasive theoretical support for contemporary and modernist art and culture, and does this even when it is in contradiction with our everyday practices: in spite of attempts by authors such as Richard Shusterman,²² to modify if not change the widely accepted position of Adorno regarding elite and avant-garde art and to accentuate instead art and culture that, while remaining oppositional, at the same time represent successful creations for public

consumption, the pervading opinion remains that Adorno developed a theory of avant-garde music, literature and elite art in general which remains valid in spite of promoting art from a century to half a century ago and in spite of the contemporary public often practicing a very different cultural consumption from the one that it theoretically and reflexively defends and promotes, also on the basis of ideas such as Adorno's.

While it is, as Teige claimed, the practice of political leaders to demand realist and populist art and culture, it is probably equally true that most theorists go in the other direction and opt for elite and avant-garde art. Why this is so becomes obvious if we read – who else? – Adorno on culture and art.

Culture in the true sense did not simply accommodate itself to human beings, but it always simultaneously raised a protest against the petrified relations under which they lived, thereby honouring them. (...) Cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through.²³

Of course, we have to read Adorno within the capitalist social framework and the market economy with its demand to transform everything into a marketable commodity. It could be claimed though, that the very same statement is valid for the socialist universe: following the views of the contemporary Russian painters Komar & Melamid and Erik Bulatov,²⁴ the difference between the two models of society was that in one existed the omnipresence of market ideology and in the other of political ideology. From this viewpoint it is understandable that for the socialist society – the Soviet one – the issue of politics was an omnipresent issue. In the other, exemplified by the USA, this was the issue of the market and consumer ideology, in which everything becomes a commodity. People, of course, mostly live off commodities and not politics. The predominance of political ideology in the socialist system explains its ideological and political preoccupation with art with which it fought political and thus ideological, and not artistic battles.

In the capitalist system, on the contrary, it is the market effect of an artwork that witnesses to its success or failure. An illustrative recent example is graffiti art, a part of which has in recent decades moved from the streets into galleries (the first exhibition of graffiti art was in 1973 in the Razor Gallery in New York), being transformed, by this very process, from subculture into art.

In this regard the United States represents the main relatively »pure« example of consumer culture and market ideology, making understandable the early critique of Adorno of the American consumer society. Perhaps this also makes understandable Lenin's demand, in his *What Is to Be Done?* essay from 1902, for the development of a socialist ideology, for to repeat his phrase, »The working class spontaneously gravitates towards Socialism, but the more widespread (and continuously revived in the most diverse forms) bourgeois ideology nevertheless imposes itself upon the working class still more.« As we well know, the market continuously offers novel commodities and revives our need for them and their diverse forms.

What is the relation between art and politics under the contemporary conditions of the postmodern, the postindustrial and the global society? What has changed from the time when art had to oppose the political pressures, as noted by Merleau-Ponty and Marcuse (in the process often undergoing the Hegelian master/slave relationship), while today it appears that there are no obvious political pressures to oppose, for at least to a certain social and cultural depth we seem to be immersed in the democratic and politically

correct discursive reality? Which is thus the power that is being opposed and is the oppressing power? »At one and the same time /society/ sees itself as something quite evident and transparent, whose necessity eclipses that of every *ego sum*, and as an opacity that denies itself every subjective appropriation.«²⁵ This opacity appears today more opaque and to be reaching deeper than in the modernist past.

One of the characteristics of contemporary global society is its dissemination of power. As Alain Badiou rightfully claims, in contemporary philosophy,

the metaphysics of truth has become impossible. (...) Philosophy can no longer pretend to be what it had for a long time decided to be, that is, a search for truth. (...) [T]he language is the crucial site of thought because that is where the question of meaning is at stake. Consequently, the question of meaning replaces the classical question of truth.²⁶

If, then, truth is no longer the essential issue of philosophy as thought – as well as of art or politics, but this become now meaning and language – then we can perhaps make another claim, this time following another, already quoted author, namely Jacques Rancière. According to Rancière politics consists in reconfiguring the division of the sensible, and »makes visible what has not been and makes us listen to speakers whom we have until then perceived only as sound-making animals.«²⁷ The important segment, also crucial for contemporary art, is to make someone speak and be heard, to present himself or herself, to give oneself the voice that is to be heard. As it becomes immediately obvious the desire and the aim to speak – in all its various metaphorical ways – reaches far beyond the potentials of art as an institution. It brings the artistic in art in the vicinity of the aesthetic as understood by Schiller and grants art the utopian dimension which transcends the limitations imposed upon it by various center of social power and control.

It thus appears that when comparing Marcuse's views regarding art and politics from three decades ago with ours there are changes to be discerned in all three issues regarding art that he discussed. Furthermore, another issue has emerged in the meantime, an issue that Marcuse saw as resolved, namely the questionable future resolving of issues raised within and by modernity. For him, too, modernity appeared an incomplete project, but also one with an assured future.

This most crucial difference that has emerged between Marcuse's and our time is then the contemporary lack of belief into the possibility of a social utopia. It is this impossibility of utopia that carries grave repercussions for contemporary art, as well as for social thought, for both have for much of the past two centuries existed within the aesthetic dimension, an essential part of which was what could perhaps be called the »aesthetic future.«

To speak of art's historical death as an historic phenomenon may thus not be such a fanciful idea. In Marcuse's time it was still possible to regard art as avoiding both the political ideology and the consumer ideology. The relation of politics and art has since then shifted to another segment of the social field, namely that of making visible what until now has not been. In this regard contemporary art is concerned with the microphysics of power and politics.

Of course, one of the features of art is that it always comes up with the unexpected. Even if this happens – or, rather, when it happens – art will not reenact its twentieth-century liaisons with politics which were, as a rule, *une mésentente*, a disagreement and a misunderstanding – but even on those terms, appearing within the aesthetic dimension.

What, finally, would modernist art, politically avant-garde or artistically autonomous, be without its uneasy liaison with politics?

¹ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension. Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), ix.

² Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2004), 60.

³ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004), 27.

⁵ Giovanni Papini, "Pourquoi je suis futuriste," in Giovanni Lista (ed.), *Futurisme. Manifestes – Documents – Proclamations* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1973), 91.

⁶ Quoted in Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922* (New York: Abrams, 1971), 219.

⁷ Clement Greenberg, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, 1939.

⁸ See for example Brandon Joseph, *Random Order. Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 5 et passim.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture. Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 19.

¹⁰ Roger Garaudy, *Réalisme sans rivages* (Paris: U.G.E. 10/18, 1971).

¹¹ Karel Taige, *Vašar umetnosti* (Belgrade: NIP Mladost, 1977), 323.

¹² Joel Snyder, "Picturing Vision," in W.J.T. Mitchell (ed.), *The Language of Images* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 234.

¹³ V.I. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1973), 51.

¹⁴ Quoted in Matthew Culler Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 141.

¹⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Marxism and Superstition," in *Signs* (Minneapolis: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 261.

¹⁶ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 35.

¹⁷ See Claude Lefort, *Les formes de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978). See also Aleš Erjavec, "Introduction," in Aleš Erjavec (ed.), *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

¹⁸ See Erjavec, op. cit.

¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Ce que parler veut dire* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), 73.

²⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 37.

²¹ Geeta Kapur, "When Was Modernism in Indian Art?" in Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher (eds.), *Over Here. International Perspectives on Art and Culture* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004) 79.

²² See Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), Esp. 50 et passim.

²³ Theodor Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," in Brian O'Connor (ed.), *The Adorno Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 232.

²⁴ On this, see Erjavec, op. cit., 28-29 et passim.

²⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 75.

²⁶ Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought* (London: Continuum, 2005), 34-35.

²⁷ Rancière, *Malaise dans l'esthétique*, 37-38.

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Condition (ed.; Berkeley 2003), *Love at Last Sight. Avant-Garde, Aesthetics, and the End of Art* (Ljubljana 2004); *Aesthetics and/as Globalization* (ed.; Ljubljana 2004).

