

# **I CAN'T WORK LIKE THIS**

**A READER ON  
RECENT BOYCOTTS  
AND CONTEMPORARY ART**

Edited by  
Joanna Warsza and the participants of the Salzburg  
International Summer Academy of Fine Arts



# EAST WEST, MANIFESTA

VESNA MADŽOSKI

*The way to carry out good propaganda is never to appear to be carrying it out at all.*

—Richard Crossman, former UK  
Cabinet Minister and Assistant Chief of  
the Psychological Warfare Department

<sup>1</sup>  
Brian O'Doherty, *Inside  
the White Cube: The Ideology of  
the Gallery Space*. University of  
California Press, 1999, 74.

The Western art world is still embedded in the modernist construction of a “white cube” as a guarantee of its separation and independence from the outside world(s). This white and sterile form of exposure also came to be considered a guarantee of an objective gaze in a neutral space out of time, and, in the words of Brian O'Doherty, a space that functions as a “stabilizing social construct” and a guarantee of social stability.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, this notion of independence and neutrality becomes complicated with the entrance of the main agents of the relationship that is constructed within the exhibition space: of art objects, on the one hand, and viewers, on the other. Through this, the outside world enters. Art objects are not part of some “immaculate conception,” but rather are products of specific circumstances, loaded with different meanings through the act of exhibiting. From their side, viewers bring into this space complex networks of relations and visual regimes of perceiving the exhibited objects. Through these agents then, the illusion of objectivity and neutrality vanishes, right in front of our eyes.



As a creation of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Manifesta, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art, was, from the beginning, entrapped in much more than discussions of aesthetics alone; at the moment when the world was celebrating the fall of Communism, and when new ways of promoting Dutch art abroad were needed, Manifesta became a platform dedicated to bringing together the former East and the former West, although it had become clear which side had won the battle. In the words of Hans Belting,

The unity of Western Art, which had become uncertain, gained its common profile from the contrast to that of East European art. [...] Each lived from a tradition that was defined against that of the other. This is why open frontiers that resulted from the collapse of the Soviet empire gave rise to such hysterical reactions in the West, when it became clear that matters of identity had to be defined in substance rather than by demarcation [...] Western culture, which claims for itself the idea of freedom and the presence on the market, now emerges as the universal heir of history, simply swallowing up the Eastern culture that was so much compromised. [...] Now, even in the East, art has to be "professional," in that it is "paid for, exhibited and institutionalized."<sup>2</sup>

2

Hans Belting, *Art History After Modernism*. University of Chicago Press, 2003, 56–57.

One of the important revelations regarding the history of contemporary art came, surprisingly or not, after the release of portions of CIA documents during the Nineties. In her analysis of this previously secret archive, Frances Stonor Saunders states,

During the height of the Cold War, the US government committed vast resources to a secret programme



of cultural propaganda in western [sic] Europe. A central feature of this programme was to advance the claim that it did not exist. It was managed, in great secrecy, by America's espionage arm, the Central Intelligence Agency. [...] At its peak, the Congress for Cultural Freedom had offices in thirty-five countries, employed dozens of personnel, published over twenty prestige magazines, held art exhibitions, owned a news and features service, organized high-profile international conferences, and rewarded musicians and artists with prizes and public performances. Its mission was to nudge the intelligentsia of western Europe away from its lingering fascination with Marxism and Communism towards a view more accommodating of 'the American way'. [...] The result was a remarkably tight network of people who worked alongside the Agency to promote an idea: that the world needed a *Pax Americana*, a new age of enlightenment, and it would be called The American Century."<sup>3</sup>

3  
Frances Stonor Saunders,  
*The Cultural Cold War: The CIA  
and the World of Arts and  
Letters*, (New York: The New  
Press, 1999), 1-2.

In the year 2014, we have witnessed the revival of Cold War politics, by which I mean that the Manifesta that was to take place in Saint Petersburg became one of the platforms where current political frictions were played out. Unfortunately, it strongly held onto the old Cold War rhetoric of enlightening the non-enlightened in Russia through the means of contemporary art, a favorite tool of American foreign policy. Hence, all potential for a fruitful discussion was closed off with a lot of noise.

Sometimes accused of being "an extension of Brussels' cultural policy" and "complicit in the current official disappearance of immigrants in Europe from its cultural institutions," Manifesta gives us the possibility to read "Europe" through its official art biennial.<sup>4</sup> How does this Europe look within the scope

4  
Okwui Enwezor, "Tebbit's  
Ghost," in *The Manifesta Decade:  
Debates on Contemporary  
Art Exhibitions and Biennials in  
Post-Wall Europe* (Cambridge,  
MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 184.



of current political developments? One could say that we live in times when the East has rediscovered capitalism, while the West has rediscovered *Das Kapital*. The change the former East was forced into has been named transition, and it actually meant a total dismantling of the legacy of the previous fifty years of Communist modernism.

The return of the cruelest form of capitalism turned the majority of places into desolate and depressing towns and regions, actually transforming them into something capitalism used to imagine Communism looked like. As a consequence, all this brought about only more confusion in the former Communist states. At the present moment, the East must have a strange feeling, encountering the crisis of capitalism and reconsidering going back to its recent past; at the same time, the progressive political camps in the former West promote this same past of the former East as a leap forward. While the leftist and pacifist options on all sides search for a common ground and a common vocabulary, current right-wing power structures in Europe have no problem in exploiting this situation of confusion, radicalizing things to dangerous proportions.

The crucial question at this moment is not in Manifesta's past, but in its future, at the 2016 edition in Zürich. Clearly, not having to focus on the former East anymore, this "safe" choice of a host city opens up the question of whether this edition is able to recreate a space for so-called neutrality, something Switzerland is usually seen as representing. Or will it actually reveal the uncomfortable truth behind this neutrality, which serves as a smoke screen for the hardly legal, secret banking business? While waiting for the answers to these questions, we can only hope that Europe will find enough strength to resist the tension created by the fragmenting tendencies of political elites, refusing to be dragged into another armed conflict which could prove fatal this time. One of the novelties of



our current times is the appearance of whistle-blowers, whose actions provoked a sudden but silent disappearance of conspiracy theories; what used to be easily discredited as pure speculation by silly minds, is nowadays proven in black and white, easily sustained by material proof directed against those in power. Not having to wait for decades for the secret archives to be opened, it will be up to us to start paying attention to those details before it becomes too late.