

SLOVENE SCULPTURE AND AMERICA: PLACES AND OBJECTS

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No place to go

In the last few years I have often been asked what Slovene identity in art was. Previously I had not given much thought to identity, and I found it typical that this demand to determine difference, uniqueness should come from the people living in the world of pragmatic individualism, a world I was not familiar with. In short, I felt that this demand for identity was related to individualism.

Western European and American individualism puts the larger community firmly in second place. This larger community is generally known as "global public opinion," whose impotence or alleged power spring to mind every time I think of Sarajevo. A friend told me that he was watching a music show from a Sarajevo studio just before the shelling started; the DJ said something along the lines of: "Here in Sarajevo we listen to the same pop music as the rest of the world. It's absolutely impossible that the world would allow aggression against us." For me this anecdote about public opinion, the expectations of some and the helplessness of others, shows individualism as just another Utopia. We live in a time when great ideologies, styles, and self-contained, different worlds are ceasing to be. The globalization of culture and the indiscriminate intertwining of everything with everything else are reflected in a world where the predominance of centers is disappearing, taking along the center itself and the related ideas of identity and form.

If in such a world Slovene art is in any way different, it is due to its past, to its own existential experience of its own Utopia. I am referring to the suspended time before the political changes, when we shared a distinct *Zeitgeist* with the rest of Eastern Europe. Peter Handke was right: the time before the political changes was our time of difference within Europe.¹ Handke has idealized this

¹ Peter Handke, *Sanjačevo slovo od devete dežele: resničnost, ki je minila spomin na Slovenijo*, (Klagenfurt/Salzburg: Wieser, 1991; transl. of *Ab-*

difference, and at the time I felt his essay naively romantic. Today we know from first-hand experience how tedious it is to be like everyone else; and we also know that we no longer have to emigrate in order to lose our identity — an identity determined by the area of state, language, people.

Genius loci

The term *genius loci* means the spirit of a place, the unique feeling a place has. Nowadays a mythological shadow seems to be the only thing remaining of this term — probably because what used to determine the originality of a place is disappearing. The notion of residing in a definite, unique place has given way to the notion of non-belonging, of dislocation. Thus I now understand the term *genius loci* differently from the way I did ten or fifteen years ago. I am not only alluding to the present political situation in Europe, in Eastern Europe, in Bosnia, where places the size of states have joined the game of territories; I am referring to the ease with which territories seem to appear and disappear. Within an interval of barely two years we acquired the Czech Republic, but lost Prague to an influx of 35,000 Americans and the breathtaking pace of restoration of city center façades, a restoration which can make one suddenly start and think “I’m in Strasbourg or some other European town, but not Prague,” when on a stroll through the town.

People who had the opportunity to cross the border separating East from West Berlin probably remember the dusty quality of East Berlin and the uncanny feeling that time had stopped there. But this time-lag behind Western Europe also had a poetical side to it; as though in a science-fiction novel a person who had already experienced the eighties found himself in an architectural environment which fundamentally corresponded to West Berlin except for the spirit of the place, which was stuck in the fifties. It was no coincidence that Wim Wenders made his film about the cinemas of East Germany in black and white. The lag behind real time, the musty dustiness, and the emptiness were part of the identity of Eastern European towns prior to the changes, the deter-

mining spirit of the place. And another thing: the symbolic takes place in an empty place or over an empty place. I remember Telč in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s: it was a virtually empty town, so empty one heard the sound of one's own footsteps when walking through it. At that time Telč struck me as merely a façade.

The moment the town caught up with the rest of the world, it lost its nostalgic style, which had been the guardian of and witness to its past and which had lain there in repose as potential for the future. It was as though, prior to its entry into real time, the town had a past and a future, but did not exist in the present. The renovation of façades, i.e., the concern for identity in the constructed image, has become a symbolic act throughout Eastern Europe; but there is a snag. It has probably not yet occurred to anyone that, once all the façades are renovated, Prague will lose its past. It will undergo a similar transformation as Heidelberg, where the old historical town nucleus was so meticulously renovated and so thoroughly filled with activity that the spirit of the past faded. In one of his films Syberberg protests against the Americanization of post-war Germany, i.e., the loss of its typical style. But nobody mentions how typical regional architecture in, say, Heidelberg looks like Disneyland, like scenography to be enjoyed, whose form I no longer understand, or could understand, if I wanted to.

Today, my body and my being do not live in the world of form, nor in the world of historical form. The fact that form has lost its meaning represents a serious loss for the stable, eternity-oriented world which we used to describe with the term *genius loci*. Today the concept of man and even the human body itself are not connected to a particular territory. We can live as citizens without a town, as tourists, or as displaced persons.

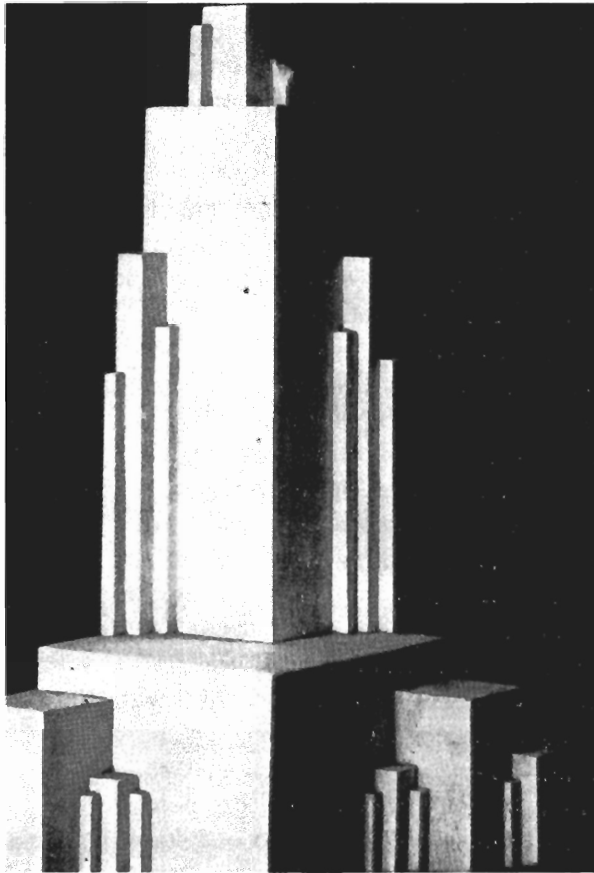
As soon as the new Eastern European states were established, confirming their respective existences, pasts, identities, they entered the post-historical period, the era of non-belonging.

The adaptability of form to all contents

The way we lived in Slovenia before the political changes was reflected in modernist art, which idealized the exterior world. By exterior world I do not mean the external image of the environment but the existential conditions.

The period of modernism in Slovenia extended from a brief post-war period of social realism to far beyond post-modernism,

which was little known in our country. Modernism fitted the artist more than snugly, and it also corresponded to state ideology. At first glance it would seem that this occurred because modernism spoke in universal terms, not relatively, thus coinciding with an ideology which favoured the community above the individual.



KAZIMIR MALEVICH, *ARKHITEKTON*,
before 1927

Upon taking a more objective look, however, breaking the bonds of here-and-now perception, we can see that modernism attempted to complete the thought of humanist Man by finally limiting the role of art to the essential: discovering the "essence," determining the purpose of existence, determining truth. From here arise the major modernist questions: what is Sculpture, what is

the essence in Art? The ambition of modernism was to present the universal truth in form. The desire to discover the essence in form presumed that form always displayed the particular content which was attributed to it. This assumption overlooked the fact that form had no trouble adapting to any content whatsoever.

We will consider three examples, all of them from architecture. They will show that the same form can in different cultural and political environments easily adapt to diverse meanings, and thus embody distinct ideas.



D.N. ČEČULIN & I.M. TIGRANOV, *PROJECT FOR ADMINISTRATIVE BUILDING*, MOSCOW, 1947

In the 1920's the Ukrainian artist Malevich exhibited wooden models which he called *Arkhitektons*. To him an Arkhitekton re-

presented a pure vision, a pure idea. The abstractness of the project was guaranteed by the fact that in his eyes an Arkhitekton had no scale.² The 1947 project for the *Administrative Building* in Moscow was very similar in form. This, however, was to a precisely determined scale, i. e. to the scale of the state ideology. Through sheer size the building was to dominate everything around it, and to dwarf man. The individual's self-awareness here differed greatly from the self-awareness of somebody entering the Life Corporation building in New York. It is interesting to think that Stalin demanded that the new architecture of Moscow did not resemble foreign architecture. The form of the Administrative Building was to express nationality, and its content was to be social.³ At the time no-one wondered about what seems so obvious today: that the appearance of New York in 1915 served as an architectural vision for Moscow in 1950;⁴ the Administrative Building was in form identical to the Life Corporation building.

American and Slovene modernist sculpture

Minimalism represents the climax of American modernist sculpture. With a typically pragmatic approach American minimalist sculptors set out to discover the universal truth in the exterior world of experience.

In the 1970s Carl Andre made a series of sculptures called "rugs." They were composed of identical flat squares, forming a simple square form which lay on the floor of the exhibition space. Andre said on the subject of one of these sculptures: "My work is without transcendent form, without spiritual or intellectual quality. It is made out of its own materials without pretension to other materials. The form is equally accessible to all men."⁵ The viewer was to see what there was in the gallery space: the material, the

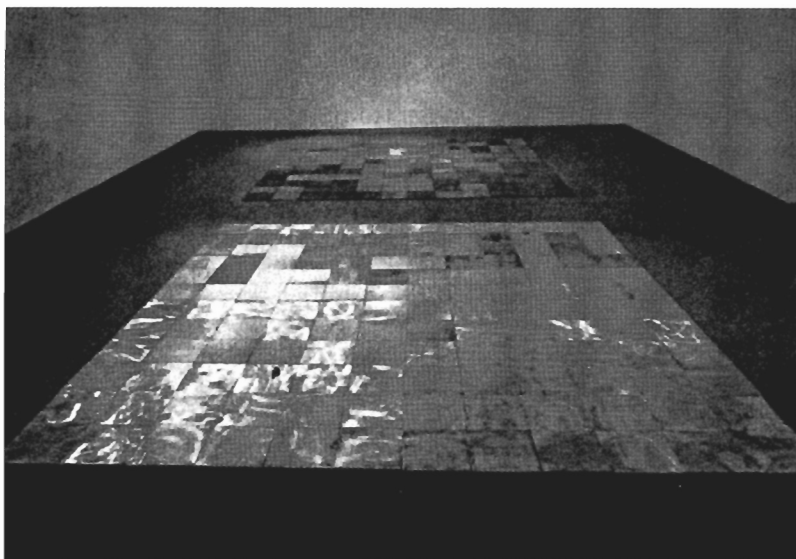
² Rainer Crone and David Moos, *Kazimir Malevich, The Climax of Disclosure* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991).

³ *Tyrannie des Schönen, Architektur der Stalin-Zeit*, a catalog. Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna, 6 Apr. - 17 Jul. 1994; see also Anatole Senkevitch, Jr., "The Stalinist Skyscraper," unpublished paper, AAASS Convention, Philadelphia, 1994.

⁴ Galina N. Jakowlewa, "Ausdruck der höchsten Organisiertheit, Architektur und die Umgestaltung der sowjetischen Gesellschaft," *Kunst und Diktatur*, a catalog. Künstlerhaus Vienna, 28 Mar. -15 Aug. 1994.

⁵ *Minimalism*, a catalog. Tate Gallery, London. 21 Mar. 1989 - 18. Feb.1990; see also David Bourdon, "The Razed Sites of Carl Andre," *Minimal Art, a Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968).

form, and the presence of both. These “rugs” were an extreme example of emphasizing presence, lying in the room in such a way that the viewer could walk over them. When I step on a sculpture, I am aware of its dimensions in every moment, and of its shape, and through this, I am aware of myself, my body, space, and time. In minimalism all these experiences came to life in the presence of the sculpture. Andre: “The sense of one’s own being in the world is confirmed by the existence of things.”⁶



CARL ANDRE, *111 LEAD PLATES*, 1969
(lead, 243 x 243 cm)

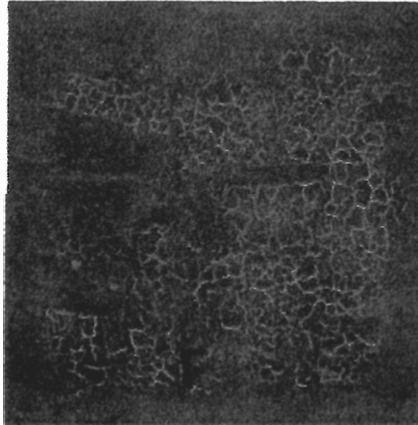
The emphasis laid on one’s physical experience of space can also be understood in another way: as a metaphor for the American individual’s everyday life, in which they have to constantly reaffirm their presence in society in a world of constant change, and thus also their presence in this place, on the ground on which they stand, here and now.

The shared space of the sculpture and the viewer, a free-standing and autonomous sculpture — these are in this respect American subjects.

In Slovenia, we saw more than merely material in space in the form of Andre’s “rugs.” The American saying “What you see is

⁶ *Minimalism*, a catalog.

what you get” would have appeared too realistic and vulgar in its directness. We understood space also as a field of absence, and the presence of the form as emptiness. “Here the void was understood as the essential in form,”⁷ was how Malevich explained his 1913 painting *Black Suprematist Square*. We saw the spirit of Malevich’s square hovering behind the material presence of Andre’s square “rug.” Thus we saw in abstract forms far more than the material: we saw the essence, everything and nothing at the same time. It was the pathos of nothingness which embodied the pleasure of the undefined and the melancholy with which we liked to identify in Eastern Europe. The viewer’s gaze was not supposed to stop at the material, it was meant to perceive in the sculpture the sublimation of reality and the nothingness — in short, everything there is beyond the material. We were not interested in the presence of the sculpture, nor in space here and now. The sculpture reflected our attitude to the external world.



KAZIMIR MALEVICH, *BLACK SUPREMACIST SQUARE*, 1915
79.5 x 79.5 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

⁷ *Kazimir Malevich*, a catalog. Russian Museum, Leningrad; Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. 10 Nov. 1988 - 29 May 1989.

The way we lived

I remember how in the 1970s and 1980s Slovene artists liked to stress that, if we had to choose a larger whole to belong to, it was Europe in general rather than Eastern Europe. In comparison to other Eastern European nations we were free to travel around Europe to our hearts' content. True, once in Europe, we moved about like discreet outside observers, but nevertheless, none of us was forced to emigrate in order to be able to experience first hand what this larger whole was like or to experience the broader spiritual space of which we formed part. We deliberately ignored the fact that we did not take an active part in the life of Europe, that we did not participate in the game, and that we did not have exhibitions in Europe.

In 1991 Slovenia became an independent state. This spurred the desire to act, and also to co-operate with Europe and Eastern Europe. A free flow of information between Eastern European countries, which had been previously practically non-existent, was set up. I realized only then that the problems which intellectuals in Ljubljana faced before the political changes did not differ greatly from those of intellectuals in, let us say, St. Petersburg. Intellectuals in Eastern Europe tended to unite around what they rejected rather than what they accepted. Had they been asked to stand for something, many of them would have been at a loss.⁸ The issue was not the individual's statement, or a distinct way of thinking, but just the opposite, a uniform way of thinking. In this draft-proof space of clearly defined boundaries there existed a consensus among artists that the thing to do was deal with universal truths rather than an — innately relative — statement of the individual. The road to the articulation of universal truths led through the personal, inner world, thus being the exact opposite of the road taken by the American minimalists, who sought the universal in the external world of experience. It was due to this inward-looking orientation that the artists considered themselves the guardians of individuality in a political situation whose dominant mythology was not centered on the individual but on the community in general. We united our voices in a silent opposition to the ideology, letting Art speak instead of the artist. Our work existed

⁸ Fred Hiatt, "In Russia of Free Speech, Intellectuals Wonder What to Say," *The Washington Post*, 19 Jul. 1992.

by differing from the ideology — it was apolitical — and being in no way in the service of the ideology. We were familiar with the trap of socialist realism and the ideologically involved artist, where Ideology spoke instead of the artist.

The extent of truth can only be perceived as long as one is passive; the instant one becomes active, one begins to alter one's perspective and to see the world relatively and not absolutely. In the motionless time and space of our inward-oriented existence there was no desire for the external world: as a rule, we did not take part in the social and political life. And *vice versa*, the external world took no interest in our work. The art market was virtually non-existent. The sale of a painting or a sculpture was not a common event; we did not think in terms of selling. A work of art acquired status through the idea behind it and not through its market value. Likewise, the object of trade did not have a special status in our society. I remember that it was forbidden to advertize consumer goods on bulletin boards. Since the object did not hold a central position in our lives, object sculpture — where it appeared — represented the sublimation of the objective world.

It was usual for an artist to have exhibitions every year in the same town, often even in the same gallery. We lived in a world of proximity to everything and everyone. We did not have to expose ourselves with a personal statement to be understood. And besides, a statement presupposes a listener. In contrast our art was intended above all for ourselves. Those who lived outside the borders of our world did not know what we were after, what our works represented, but this did not matter, we knew we were right. We idealized our own activities and the fact that our work did not concern itself with the "dirty" exterior world. In our sealed world there developed an understanding of modernist self-referentiality, of that which shows the essence, often in poetic abstraction. Through its indefinite nature, poetic abstraction spoke to the artist about everything, and to society about nothing, and was, while supposedly considering everything, prone to talk about nothing at all.

In Slovenia this served the purposes of the political system. Artists were exactly where the system wanted to have them. If they were not willing to co-operate with the ideology, they were at least politically harmless. This was quite an unusual combination of ideology and art. It came about, above all, because of the nature of modernism itself. Never before nor since has art reached such a

Utopian naivety regarding society and nature, history and political ideology as in the period of modernism.

This is also the reason why, until the political changes, there was no post-modernism in Slovenia, with the exception of the group IRWIN. We did not say: "I speak," but said in unison with the group: "We speak." The art of Slovene modernist artists, like the work of Irwin, was shaped by and existed in relation to the ideology. The only difference was that the groups formed within the NEUE SLOWENISCHE KUNST were well aware of this.

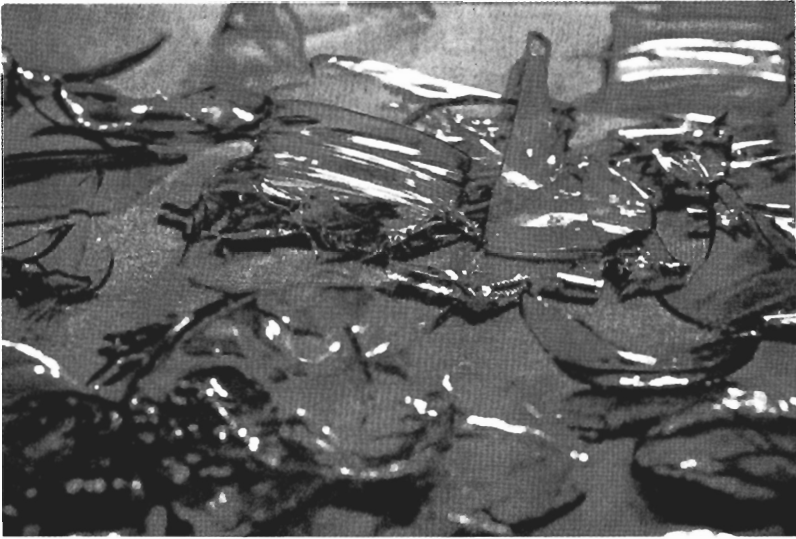


IRWIN, ČRNI KVADRAT NA RDEČEM TRGU
(BLACK SQUARE ON RED SQUARE), 1992
22 x 22 m.

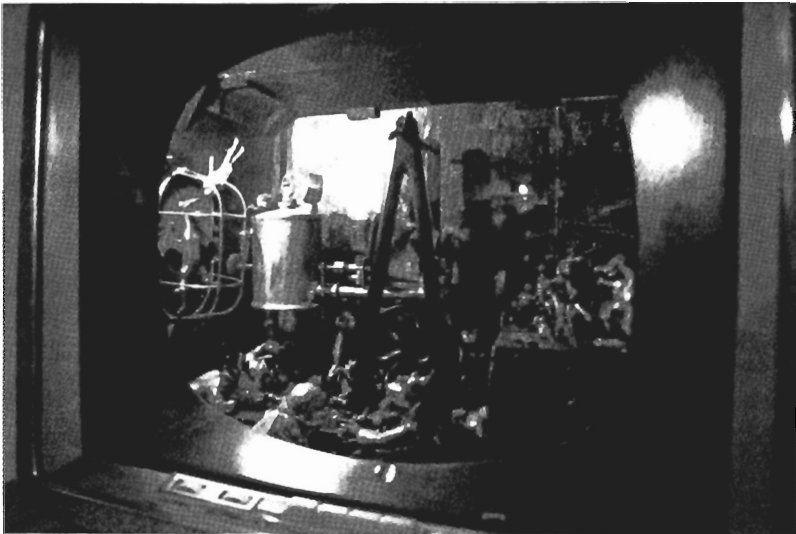
Contemporary Slovene artists' territory

In a world where differences are disappearing, there is no need for universal speech. What then makes contemporary Slovene art distinctive? It is not concerned with object art or the physical presence of the object in space. Having lost the ground of the exterior world in the here-and-now, it has been driven to search for other, different spaces, which could be called imaginary territories. This has undoubtedly been aided by the fact that European man has never stood alone in space, but always in the context of

ideology, culture, philosophy. His personal experience is closely related to this context.



TADEJ POGAČAR, *LABORATORIJ II*, 1994
(Likovni salon, Celje)



MARKO KOVAČIČ, *DEVETI KROG (NINTH CIRCLE)*, 1994
Galerija SKUC, Ljubljana

The group *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, who claim that "Ideology speaks instead of the individual," have recently shown imaginary spaces of Ideology in *NSK Embassies* (in Moscow and Gent), in an *NSK State* (in Berlin), and in *NSK Consulates*. The embassies do not represent a real territory; they do however issue passports. These territories are the territories of Art, where all debates and events are carefully recorded, documented and then presented in book form.

Tadej Pogačar set up the *Museum of Modern Art* in 1990. It has no exhibition spaces of its own, no body of its own. He considers his museum a parasite-museum and therefore exhibits in other museums. The exhibition project he has set for himself he calls a *Laboratory*. It is a metaphor for our existence before the political changes, when people were living exhibits in the political experiment carried out in the "laboratory" of self-management.



V.S.S.D., (*TI, TEBE*) *TEBI. BELOOČNICA*
 (*[THOU, THINE] TO YOU. WHITE-EYE*) 1994
 600 x 600 cm, Obalne galerije, Koper

Marko Kovačič exhibits objects symbolizing the socialist past. The exhibits are displayed in so that they tempt the viewer to draw them closer to the eye, to scrutinize and manipulate them, in short, to do to the exhibits what the system they symbolize had done to

the viewer. Marko Kovačič also utilizes the manipulation of viewing when commenting upon our present-day world. He invites the viewers to settle comfortably in an arm-chair in the exhibition area and watch a TV screen, where they can not see the usual glittering two-dimensional moving images, but a motionless, spatial scene, to which they can contribute their own stories. The group V.S.S.D. [= Veš slikar svoj dolg (Painter, do you know your dues)] covers the floors of gallery rooms with fields of patterned sand. The space of the fields is a metaphor for human absence. The presence of the viewer in such a space is impossible: we do not enter these fields, since the intrusion of our bodies would destroy them. Their fragility and transitoriness (they have to be set up again and again) speaks about an experience of space to which the world of objects is completely alien.



MARJETICA POTRČ, *PTUJ. TERRITORY C*, 1994

I have been building copies of façades in various towns; they would form — were it possible to place them one next to the other — an imaginary wall. These territories bear the names of the towns in which they stand. They are constructed in a North-South direction, and thus oriented towards the world, regardless of the viewer or the exhibition space. They behave like uncontrollable organisms; they crumble, they listen to me, in short, they lead an existence parallel to my own.

The passing of territories.

In the past people in Europe who did not belong to a certain place (determined by language, town, country) were called migrants or homeless. But now this has changed; belonging to a certain place and the ensuing identity as formerly known in Europe are disappearing. No-one has to emigrate any longer in order to not belong to a certain place. Homelessness is, and will be, our fate; our language and our essence are and will be damaged by exile.

If we take for example towns, traditionally the mirrors of the identity of the European citizen — the notion of a town itself is related to European imagination, to the idea of what civilization is about — we quickly see that present-day constructions no longer bear any determining identity. Today architecture and the way people dress look distressingly alike all over the world. The form of old town nuclei traditionally represented the identity of a town, testifying to the town's history and our own. But nowadays these same town nuclei are not perceived as something real by the tourists who come to see and enjoy them. Typical regional architecture is now enjoyed in the same way as Disneyland. For tourists there is no great difference between Prague, London and the ruins of Mexican temples. Their motto: "Let's at least see as much as we can while we're here!"⁹ expresses a lust for consumption of the visual, without differentiation. The haste of sightseeing and the carelessness of the fleeting glance resemble the experience of staring at the television screen, switching channels with the remote control and watching different programs

⁹ Heiner Müller, "Die Fester, Europe," in *Wanderlieder*, a catalog. Stedelijk Museum, Museum of Modern Art, Amsterdam. 8 Dec. 1991 - 9. Feb. 1992; see also Heiner Müller, "Zur Lage der Nation," in *Heiner Müller in Interview mit Frank M. Gaddatz*. Rotbuch Verlag, 1990.

at the same time. When we shift our gaze from the television screen to the town itself, the façades of the houses become the screen. I remember how fascinated I was, upon returning to Ljubljana after the declaration of independence, by the fact that the façades of the buildings in the Old Town had been renovated. Undoubtedly the renovation was carried out so promptly as a way of confirming our history, our identity. But what surprised me was that the image of the Old Town struck me as flat, as something that did not really concern me in my present life, as a look backwards into the past, into a town as a museum. After all, no traffic is allowed in the Old Town, it is there to be looked at, its *raison d'être* seems to be to exist for my gaze. Here the image has become more important than the physical aspect. The multitudes of camera-loaded tourists in museums and old cities are no longer interested in one particular painting or sculpture, or in architecture: it is the photos they desire.

The form has ceased to determine us. Post-modernism called attention to this crisis by, symptomatically, struggling for meaning. While post-modernist architects in Europe still knew how to choose an appropriate meaningful façade for a particular building, this did not happen in America. Post-modernist American corporate architecture does not bear much relation to the history and meaning of form.

There is one more aspect to be considered. A European town grows from its center, the center displays everything that is constitutive for a town: the old town nucleus, the banks, the government buildings, the department stores. Simultaneously, the center signifies the place of truth in European metaphysics.¹⁰ That is why non-centrality, the globalization of culture and indiscriminate blending of everything results in such pain for the European town. We no longer live in small, separate, introvert, stable worlds with predictable values. Can I for instance say that Berlin is a German town, or even European? So many foreigners live and work there that the town would stop functioning without them.¹¹

The unease caused by the loss of identity (determined by language, people, state) of a world with clearly defined borders, testifies to the decline of centered man, who had been building a

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *L'empire des signes, Sentires de la création* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970).

¹¹ Heiner Müller, "Die Faste, Europe."

world of the physical in the form and in the meaning of the form since the Renaissance: European civilization is the culture of representation.

In a center-less world there no longer exists the desire to decipher the truth or the origin. We know that the whole is unattainable, so we have no desire to achieve it. The idea of center, so crucial for modernism, now appears as a historical illusion. In a world where the dominant topic is non-belonging and translocation, individuals are forced to accept the fact that the world will not be controlled — what they can do, however, is embrace the relativity of this world and themselves in it.

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POVZETEK

SLOVENSKO KIPARSTVO IN AMERIKA: KRAJI IN PREDMETI

Modernizem je v umetnosti hotel odkriti univerzalno resnico v formi. Umetnost, ki je sledila temu iskanju, pa se je kazala v Ameriki in v Sloveniji, v dveh različnih kulturnih in političnih prostorih, popolnoma različno. Če je ameriško modernistično kiparstvo izpostavilo prostostoječi in avtonomen kip, če je povdarjalo izkustvo prostora tukaj in sedaj, pa to ni veljalo za slovensko modernistično kiparstvo. Slovenski umetniki nismo v svojem delu razvijali predmetne umetnosti in ne fizičnega izkustva prostora. Naš svet je bil svet imaginarnih teritorijev. To je bila naša eksistencialna izkušnja, saj v vsakodnevnem življenju nismo stali na realnih tleh. V trenutku pa, ko smo v Sloveniji z lastno državo potrdili identiteto in zgodovino, smo vstopili v posthistorično dobo. Za svet, kateremu smo se pridružili, je značilna globalizacija kulture, prepletenost vsega brez razlike. Ideja centra, želja določiti univerzalno resnico, od koder je modernizem izhajal, se danes kaže kot iluzija zgodovine. Svet ni več sestavljen iz province in centra, ampak iz več ali manj enakovredno prepletenega polja. Danes se nikomur ni treba več izseliti, da bi s tem izgubil lastno identiteto. Konec velikih utopij, tako ideologij kot modernizma, je torej povezan z zginevanjem med seboj ločenih in vase zaprtih, stabilnih svetov.

