
New museum opens for the avant-garde: World's oldest collection of genre from Eastern Europe gets steady home

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With the opening of an art museum in Slovenia, artists from the region are especially interested in the display of the oldest collection in the world of Eastern European avant-garde art since the 1960s.

Borut Vogelnik had long been looking forward to the opening last week of the Muzej Sodobne Umetnosti Metelkova (Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova) in Ljubljana. "I would say that for Slovenia, this museum is going to be very important and of major value," said Mr. Vogelnik, who with four colleagues is part of IRWIN, a Slovenian artistic collective that shares the museum's focus on the role and relevance of contemporary art from Eastern Europe and Russia.

Mr. Vogelnik and other artists from the region are especially interested in the museum's display of Artest 2000+, which according to art historians is the world's oldest collection of Eastern European avant-garde art from the 1960s to the present. For the first time, Artest 2000+ -- which includes works from such artists as Miroslaw Balka, Tomislav Gotovac, Ion Grigorescu, Ilya Kabakov and Marina Abramovic -- has a permanent home, and selections from the collection will consistently be exhibited at the museum.

"It is like no other collection I know of and it stresses how Eastern European contemporary art developed," said Vadim Fishkin, a Slovenia-based Russian artist whose work is part of Artest 2000+. "Most people know about Western contemporary art development but for this part of the world, that history is kind of hidden. But to have it on display in one spot, to have a link and a connection between art that developed separately but had links at the same time to the West, is integral."

The baroque building of the contemporary art museum (known as MSUM), opposite the Slovenian Ministry of Culture, underwent an EUR 8.5 million, or \$11.4 million, renovation before opening last week. From the street side, it looks like many of the other buildings that used to make up the Yugoslav Army's barracks in the Metelkova neighborhood of Ljubljana. But from the courtyard side, a new addition looks every bit as contemporary as the art it displays inside: It has large windows with huge exterior curtains, sloping concrete walls that fuse seamlessly between the old and new construction and a huge drawing created for the entrance by the Romanian artist Dan Perjovschi titled, "In 1990 We Spoke about Freedom, Now We Speak about Money."

After Slovenia declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 and the army vacated the buildings, artists and musicians squatted in many of them, and some of these structures are still used as underground galleries and artist studios. Over the last decade or so, however, several of the buildings have been renovated into office spaces and museums. The Metelkova barracks are fast becoming Ljubljana's equivalent to Museum Island in Berlin or the MuseumsQuartier in Vienna.

The MSUM not only plays host to various simultaneous exhibitions but also houses a research library, archives and a bookshop designed to look like storage room. There is a special set of rooms developed by Apolonija Sustersic, an architect and visual artist, that allows for interactive connections with other local and international institutions that make up L'Internationale, a consortium of European museums that share similar views. These include the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana; the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art; the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands; the Museum of Modern Art in Antwerp, Belgium; and the Julius Koller Society in Bratislava, Slovakia.

While the physical structure of the MSUM is new (or at least newly updated), the Artest 2000+ collection, which makes up most of the museum's permanent collection, was amassed beginning in the early 1990s by the Moderna galerija, which was founded in 1948 as Slovenia's national museum of modern art. Its director, Zdenka Badovinac, thought that art from Eastern Europe was being overlooked, or at least somewhat incorrectly interpreted, by Western art historians and curators. Over the last 20 years, the contemporary art collection has grown considerably, and the building became too small to house both collections.

"It was a long process," said Ms. Badovinac, who is still the director of the Moderna and also the president of the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art (CIMAM). "When I became director in 1993, my colleagues and I found an institution that was very provincial, focusing more on very established Modernist artists versus what was going on in the contemporary art world, which was extremely vibrant and important. At the same time, there were many questions in the mid-1990s about how to relate our program to a context that was full of changes and a new political geography."

More than 15 years ago, the Culture Ministry allotted to Moderna galerija one of the buildings in the barracks. The Moderna will continue to run the Museum of Modern Art in its original building across town near the Slovenian National Opera and Ballet Theatre, as well as the new MSUM.

Bart de Baere, the director of the Museum of Modern Art in Antwerp, said the Moderna galerija fulfilled two important missions.

"One is to be part of internationality and the other is to be grounded in the tradition of the local," he said. "If you do not have both components, you are null and void. What was already there is now expressed in architecture."

To mark its opening, the museum has put together two exhibitions. The first, "Museum of Affects," runs until Jan. 29 and is part of a two-year project with other L'Internationale museums titled "1957-1986: Art from the Decline of Modernism to the Rise of Globalisation." The exhibition brings together works from artists including Bruce Nauman, Ilija Soskic, Jiri Kovanda, Esther Ferrer and Andy Warhol, all of which were produced during a time of global hegemonic shifts.

The second exhibition, "The Present and Presence," will continually showcase different pieces from Artest 2000+. The show questions why it has become the norm for many art institutions to only see contemporary art from a chronological standpoint. "Contemporaneity in Slovenia has two beginnings," said Ms. Badovinac. "One dates back to the 1960s, when conceptual art, performance art, institutional critique, everything we find important today, was built. But also there is the chronological aspect that is the end of Communism, Slovenia's independence, the increased globalization and new technologies. So we have two beginnings."

The exhibition, Ms. Badovinac said, investigates how time can both enslave and liberate.

"I do not like the term 'former East' because 'former East' is relevant to a system that does not exist anymore," she said. "But there are still many issues that former Communist and Socialist countries share. My thesis is that 'Eastern European art' as a concept was coined only after the regimes collapsed. So for us it was very important to be agents of our own histories."