

# Spectres after Marx: Notes on Contemporary Art's Contiguous Histories<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

As the notion of “world art history” becomes a major disciplinary focus in the history of art, we need to be careful not to repeat the hierarchies, presumptions, and prejudices that have long plagued “western” art history. In particular, we should avoid subsuming those histories that used to be called “peripheral,” “marginal,” or “non-western” within canonical narratives if we want to recognize the importance of those “peripheral” histories. This paper turns to the work of several contemporary art works to examine how artists themselves have proposed alternative models for reimagining global art histories. These are models based not on the subsumption of one history or discourse into another, but on their contiguity. Indeed, the articulation and aesthetic of contiguous histories may prove an important means for retracing the connections, rather than simply the differences, between post-communism, post-colonialism, and art histories after 1989.

**Keywords:** *Globalization; World art history; Australia; Romania; Tom Nicholson; Lia Perjovschi; Post-communism; Post-colonialism*

This essay stems from an element of scepticism about one of the core prospects for a ‘twenty-first-century art history’. More specifically, it derives from an aspect of doubt about the constitution of a global art history that, at least until James Elkins published his renowned and polemical review in *The Art Bulletin*, was perhaps not quite ‘the most pressing problem facing the discipline’ (as Elkins fired in the review’s opening salvo).<sup>2</sup> This is the deep concern that we can talk about ‘a’ – note the singular here – global art history, and it is a concern that aligns me with the numerous criticisms of Elkins’ discourse in recent years, including those published in the anthology (edited by Elkins) titled *Is Art History Global?*<sup>3</sup> By what criteria, for instance, are we to demarcate this art history from the supposedly distinct disciplines of anthropology, cultural studies, or, more slippery still, art criticism?<sup>4</sup> Who defines these criteria, so that institutional norms

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<sup>2</sup> James Elkins, “Review: *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Reinvention of Western Modernism*,” *The Art Bulletin* 86, no. 2 (June 2004): 373.

<sup>3</sup> James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> This is a point that Elkins has addressed on numerous occasions. See, for example, James Elkins, “Art History as a Global Discipline,” in *Is Art History Global?*, 3–23, and James Elkins and Michael Newman, eds., *The State of Art Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

and forms may, in Elkins' words, be 'compatible wherever they are taught',<sup>5</sup> as though heading toward a conceptual homeostasis driven by consensus, the compatible, or even the revenge of universality? Does this still smack of a certain teleology, one that shifts from conflicting local and national art histories to a more harmoniously global art history – a trajectory that draws art history's future a little too close, perhaps, towards the supposed 'end of history', and the end of conceptual or ideological conflict, as trumpeted two decades ago by Francis Fukuyama?<sup>6</sup> Or is a global art history, as Elkins on occasion implies, more synonymous with histories of non-Western art, such that a split re-emerges between an art history of the globe and a Western art history that, in reality and by virtue of its subsistence, still has global reign?

In a text as brief as this, it is not possible to provide direct answers to these and the many other questions that haunt the ambiguous concept of a global art history. Nor do I necessarily want to follow Hans Belting and shift the emphasis from a *global art history* to a history of *global art*: a practice and period of art dictated, according to Belting, by globalized financial markets since 1989. That could be mistaken for an analysis of how art practices and works function within those markets by appearing and reappearing (sometimes simultaneously) in exhibitions, art fairs, and gallery showrooms around the world<sup>7</sup>. What I *do* want to draw from Belting's critique, however – and this is implicit in his shift of focus from the globalism of the historian, towards art's agency within conditions of 'the global' – is the need to consider how artists themselves have absorbed and presented the possibilities of a twenty-first-century art history within their works.

This might seem like an odd proposal, especially for readers familiar with Elkins's recent texts, given the fact that artworks, and particularly contemporary artworks, have often been ignored in this discourse's development<sup>8</sup>. By this reckoning, twenty-first-century art history would appear to be the providence of art historians alone, who trawl through the ancient origins (whether 'indigenous' or 'Western') of their discipline. By contrast, I want to reflect on how some contemporary artworks may already indicate or be oriented towards developing new pathways for interpretation amid art's globalisation. That is, I want to analyse how such artworks, as well as art history, have developed models that can reconceive what art's 'globalism' may be. These models, I suggest, do not seek to impose a singular, universalist concept of the recent past (a teleology or a will to hegemony seemingly common to this new wing of art history, and perhaps, more broadly, to the logic of globalisation). Rather, they proffer a sense of the global grounded in difference, with specific artworks functioning as a forum within which cultural and contextual dissonances can be communicated and engaged with others, and that may thereby destabilise the pursuit (or even the expectation) of a new universalism. If such returns to the universal often depend on uniformity, compatibility, and consensus as their *modus operandi* – and on this point Fukuyama may be right: the merging of different local contexts and histories into compatibility may be no different from making those contexts 'compatible' to neoliberalism's global economy – then

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<sup>5</sup> Elkins, "Art History as a Global Discipline," 4.

<sup>6</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London and New York: Penguin, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Hans Belting, "Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate", in *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, ed. Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 38–73.

<sup>8</sup> Another exception here would be the previous issue of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* (9, no.1/2 2008/9) that was dedicated to 'twenty-first century art history' and in which artworks regained some currency within this otherwise almost exclusively theoretical discourse.

what roles, we might ask, could alternative modalities of dissonance and even dissidence play within contemporary art? Indeed, how could such modalities of dissidence disrupt the canon and authority of a still-predominantly Euramerican art history, including a canon of contemporary global art that has begun to emerge but that remains resolutely focused on artists based in the established 'centres' of art on the rim of the North Atlantic Ocean?<sup>9</sup>

As the following pages will show, one way to think about these questions lies in the ways that certain artworks are modelled not on the merging or convergence of discourses and histories, but on deliberately staged contiguities and disjunctive encounters between them. Whereas the former threatens to absorb all histories into a stable, hegemonic teleology, the latter suggests that the meeting of different historical contexts and frames of reference may lead to more fragile (or at least relative) concepts of what 'history' may be, in which the dissident and the canonical may meet without trying to assimilate the one within the other. Two questions are thus central to this text. Firstly, what is the significance of historiography – and, as the title of this text suggests, particularly historiographies of relatively forgotten, 'peripheral', or 'spectral' art histories – within contemporary art? And secondly, how have some works drawn different art and cultural histories together in contiguity so as to test their respective limits, their unexpected conjunction, and the potentialities emerging from their friction?

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What I will describe is, in part, an artistic methodology that has arisen from recent curatorial exercises, particularly large-scale exhibitions, such as biennales or recent Documentas, where works from various contexts rub shoulders and lock horns within the confines of the white cube. It is a method especially familiar from Robert Storr's exhibitions at the 2007 Venice Biennale or Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's Biennale of Sydney in 2008, for example, the results of which were occasionally very productive in the uncertainty and conceptual sparks that they generated. In the first exhibition, a suite of portraits by a sub-Saharan photographer, taken in the midst of war and decolonisation, was hung alongside a well-known Bulgarian's wall drawing about Kalashnikovs; in the other, a Central Desert painting lay singing between a futurist's muted instruments and a contemporary sound installation by two leading figures from the North Atlantic art world.<sup>10</sup> Such methods are, of course, key means by which artists from what used to be called the 'peripheries' acquire broadened (perhaps global) recognition, and they have been particularly instrumental since Jean-Hubert Martin's 1989 exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre*. Yet, if we need to attend carefully to the ways we form and frame a future art history – so as not to use the filters of the canon to recognise and legitimise non-normative histories – then the same needs to be argued of recent curatorial and artistic strategies of historiography, especially given the growing

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<sup>9</sup> On the 'shift' (if indeed there is a shift) from birth place to place-of-residence as the key factor in determining the contemporary-art historical canon's constitution—and thus the awareness that postcolonialism has barely rippled the normative functioning of art history and its markets—see Chin-tao Wu, "Biennales sans Frontières," *New Left Review* 57 (May–June 2009): 107–115.

<sup>10</sup> The first example derives from Storr's exhibition *Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense* at the 2007 Venice Biennale, involving Nedko Solakov's wall drawings and Malick Sidibé's photography; the second example stems from Christov-Bakargiev's Sydney Biennale, where works by Luigi Russolo, Doreen Reid Nakamarra and Janet Cardiff, and George Bures Miller were presented together, as a sequenza, at Pier 2/3.

influence of curatorship on art-historical methods and concepts. We may recall that this has long been one of the criticisms of *Magiciens de la Terre*, framed as it was by Euro-exotic concepts of art's romanticised 'magic'<sup>11</sup>, as well as the biennales that have emerged in far-flung regions of the globe and that are still generally modelled on colonial-era templates of the World Fairs or the Salon. Something similar can be argued of historiographical artworks, which can also recognise significant, yet marginalised, contexts through problematic frames.

An overt example of this is Michael Rakowitz's *White Man Got No Dreaming*, a large sculpture displayed at the Art Gallery of New South Wales's entrance during the 2008 Biennale of Sydney. This was a well-intentioned project. Rakowitz was introduced by curator Hetti Perkins to a number of community leaders in Sydney's Redfern, home to much of the city's Aboriginal population, at a time when a housing complex called The Block was being demolished, reconstructed, and, in the process, gentrified. Following extended discussions between Rakowitz and various Redfern residents, the artist and his collaborators used material fragments from The Block to construct a replica of Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1919–20), a "symbol", in Rakowitz's words, "which is so iconic, almost a graphic design logo for revolution [and which] can envelop a lot of things"<sup>12</sup>. The project, and particularly the Tatlin-esque model, clearly invoked a contiguity of different histories, cultural hopes, and contexts – a surprise meeting of sorts between the ambitions and potential failures of the Soviet avant-garde, and cycles of Aboriginal peoples' displacement, for example, or what Rakowitz considered the conjunction of Soviet dreaming (lower-case 'd') with Aboriginal Dreaming (upper-case 'D') as a way to communicate across histories and cultures<sup>13</sup>. Yet, if the Biennale's audience was to be attracted to this situation – that is, if the politics of The Block were to be recognised, engaged with, and granted a kind of 'legitimacy' by that audience – then it was an attraction seemingly induced or translated (or, better still, subsumed and consumed) through a cipher of the European avant-garde. Recent struggles in Redfern were thus enveloped within a now-canonical form and easily recognisable (at least, for some target audiences) signifier of 'politics' in art history, as though the only means for those struggles to acquire visibility was through the aesthetic of a European-derived "graphic design logo for revolution"<sup>14</sup>. This was not so much transcultural communication, then, as cultural containment, reinforcing the authority of Europe's modernist art history through a mode of conceptual imperialism.

Such filtrations of 'peripheral' art histories through those that are currently hegemonic – or, more accurately, such genuflections before the canon – are certainly not rare in past or present art practice. Nonetheless, there are other ways that artists across the globe have retraced specific local histories, and drawn them into conjunction with other histories from other local contexts, so as to spark transcultural connections and frictions within a rethinking of art discourse. Two such artists, Lia Perjovschi and

<sup>11</sup> Critiqued, most infamously, in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "The Whole Earth Show," *Art in America* 77, no. 5 (May 1989):150–59, 211–13.

<sup>12</sup> Zanny Begg, "Confusion, A Trip to the Dentist and the Biennale of Sydney: In Conversation with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Michael Rakowitz," *Broadsheet* 37, no. 2 (June 2008): 94.

<sup>13</sup> Begg, "Confusion," 93. Similar aims about the project were argued in Stephanie Smith, 'A Visionary Dream, Unrealized: The Drawings of Michael Rakowitz', *Afterall* 21 (Summer 2009), 73–80.

<sup>14</sup> The possible correlation between this European-derived means of making the struggles in Redfern apparent, and the gentrification of Redfern through similar modes of aestheticisation, is one that I leave open here.

Tom Nicholson, are the focus of the rest of this paper, as both have sought to develop art-historical constellations that destabilise geo-cultural hierarchies.

Lia Perjovschi's *Contemporary Art Archive/Center for Art Analysis*, or CAA (1985–2007) was a long-term project initiated in the Romanian-Hungarian border town of Oradea, then redeveloped in the artist's Bucharest apartment, after which it became a highly mobile work that travelled across continents and national borders<sup>15</sup>. From the early 1990s until its closure in 2007, the CAA hosted in-depth discussion projects that repeated the form and structure of discussions held in nonconformist Apartment Art from the late-Communist era. For readers unfamiliar with this phenomenon, Apartment Art comprised 'underground' or dissident gatherings, exhibitions, and discussions that were held in the relatively private environment of the home rather than the public space of the city or a museum. One of Apartment Art's key aims was to ensure a clandestine informality to its proceedings, so as not to raise the ire of Communist authorities, which generally repressed such unofficial gatherings and displays of art<sup>16</sup>.



Lia Perjovschi, *Contemporary Art Archive- Center for Art Analysis: Open Studio*, 1996. Image courtesy of the artist

The content of the CAA's more recent conversations was slightly different from those in late-Communist Apartment Art, however, for they generally involved discussions between people from disparate cultures about the canon of art history, its inclusions, and what exclusions have been made due to gender and nationality. These debates were often congenial, sometimes abrasive, but always highly charged, and

<sup>15</sup> Unpublished interview with Dan Perjovschi, 30 November 2006, Bucharest.

<sup>16</sup> For examples of this phenomenon in the Soviet Union, see Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge, eds., *Nonconformist Art: The Soviet Experience 1956–1986* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995).

focused on a number of highly contested topics, ranging from whether certain artists (such as Geta Brătescu, Ion Grigorescu, or Lia Perjovschi herself) were indeed excluded from art history for reasons of gender and/or nationality, through to the controversial development of Romania's new Museum of Contemporary Art in the Palace of the Parliament – a monstrous building, emblematic of Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorship – in an act that artists, including Vlad Nanca and Dan Perjovschi, believed would reduce art to a salve or means of exorcising the horrors of the Communist past<sup>17</sup>.

Just as importantly, these debates provided the backbone for Lia and Dan Perjovschi's politics of 'dizzydence', which the artists defined in the following way: as a retracing of dissident pasts, within the dizzying array of received discourses and political identifications to which contemporary art seemingly must cater, so as to be deemed 'relevant' in our globalised age. Differences of opinion and of art-historical reference were foregrounded at the CAA through these vocal exchanges of dizzydence, testing how different local histories conflicted or corresponded with each other across temporal and spatial borders, or whether various cultural politics – including, it should be noted, dizzydence itself – could be effectual in actuality rather than just in discourse. On the one hand, then, it was through the connections made between the CAA's discussants, in its Bucharest home and through the artists' worldwide forums, that points of contiguity, difference and correlation began to emerge between peoples, their frames of knowledge and opinions. It was through these conversations that awareness of cultural histories could bubble back to the surface of thought, ensuring profound, inter-cultural connection and friction between audiences worldwide. On the other hand, while aesthetic politics of dissident Apartment Art and its remobilisation as dizzydence provided the frame for these debates, the conflicts about their efficacy or viability beyond Romania were continually destabilised, undercut by uncertainty and their inherent and forceful fragility. Rather than present contested histories through a stable, canonical frame – a circumstance we saw in Rakowitz's work, with its sublation of contemporary politics in Tatlin's (apparently universal) 'graphic design logo' of revolution – Perjovschi's CAA suggested a more complex aesthetic approach. This was a will to refuse her practice – or, indeed, marginalised nonconformist practices in general – a kind of art-historical hegemony, even as she drew the spectres of dissident pasts back into shadowy presence.

Such mobile and remobilised revenants have been significant throughout Europe since the 1980s, but most particularly in the wake of Communist repression. As I have argued elsewhere, they form the basis, however precarious, for what I have termed a 'postsocialist aesthetic', as seen in the practices of Ilya Kabakov, IRWIN, Thomas Hirschhorn, and others<sup>18</sup>. Yet it would be wrong to brand this kind of haunting as a strictly European phenomenon. For a number of artists in Australia, twenty-first-century art histories can also be traced through dissident local pasts, albeit in different manifestations from those lurking in Perjovschi's apartment. One example can be found

<sup>17</sup> Unpublished interview with Dan Perjovschi, 30 November 2006, Bucharest; Lia Perjovschi and Dan Perjovschi, interview with the author, 20 June 2008, Sydney. An archive of this latter debate can be found in one of the Perjovschis' self-published newspapers: see Dan Perjovschi and Lia Perjovschi, *Detective Draft* (Bucharest: Center for Art Analysis, 2005). An excellent analysis of other discussions and debates within the CAA can be found in Kristine Stiles, ed., *States of Mind: Dan and Lia Perjovschi* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Anthony Gardner, "Installation as Critique, Installation as Philosophy," *Column* 4 (2009):18-28; and Charles Green and Anthony Gardner, "The Second Self: A Hostage of Cultural Memory," *A Prior* 16 (Spring 2008): 228-47.

in the work of Melbourne-based Wiradjuri artist, Brook Andrew, as I proposed in a recent analysis of what Andrew calls “the skin of now”<sup>19</sup>. A second example emerges in the work of another Melbourne-based artist, Tom Nicholson, and his invocation of spectres through the public acts of the meeting and the march.

Since 2003, Nicholson has proposed and occasionally staged collective actions that seek to retrace significant or potentially revolutionary events from cultural histories across the globe. In *Marches for a May Day, Sydney* (2005), Nicholson organised two banner marches to be held on consecutive days at dawn through the streets of eastern Sydney. The routes were slightly different each time. The first approximated the shape of the national border constructed between Cambodia and South Vietnam in 1954, a line retraced across the Sydney street directory and then the city itself, from the Waverley cemetery to the beachside suburb of Bronte. The second roughly charted the shape of the border between Cambodia and Vietnam, imposed in 1975 toward the end of the Vietnam War<sup>20</sup>. Nicholson's banners were thus suspended within arbitrary approximations in Australia of the shifting divisions between artificially-constructed nations in Asia. This suspension within the arbitrary was matched in at least two other ways as well. The first relates to the images on the banners, which were derived from David's commemorative painting of Marat at his last breath, suspended in oil and canvas between survival and death. Nicholson translated the image of Marat's face from the horizontal to an upright, fronto-parallel plane, drawing and redrawing Marat's visage by hand and computer to create twelve distinct pixellations of David's revolutionary image. The deformed images at once cited, yet in a sense dissolved, the historical potency of the portrait. These banners were subsequently presented in a range of contextually rich locations, highlighting the historical and interpretive polysemy of the banner march itself. Four were displayed atop Melbourne's Trades Hall building in 2005, suggesting correlations between Nicholson's marches and the trade-union movements that neoliberal governments, in Australia and elsewhere, have consistently sought to eradicate. Another wound its way onto a gallery floor, replicating the trademark felt scrolls by the art-politician Joseph Beuys, but in a way that made Nicholson's image of the revolutionary unviewable.

The banners' processions through Sydney's streets and cemeteries bring yet more contextual histories into contiguity. They may at once allude to the procession of religious (and, Nicholson notes, particularly Catholic) icons through the public domain, or the photographs borne by family and friends of the recently deceased – a sight most familiar in recent years from news reports from Palestine, Iraq, or Latin America.<sup>21</sup> For some viewers, according to Nicholson, the marches have recalled the pompous processions of state power within Europe's Communist regimes, while his walks through the Western Australian wheat-belt town of Kellerberrin, where he undertook an arts residency in 2004, were interrupted by white locals asking whether he was alright, because only Aboriginal people would walk across country. The custom for Kellerberrin's other residents was to drive to their destination, even if just down the road<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Anthony Gardner, “The Skin of Now: Contemporary Art, Contiguous Histories,” in *Brook Andrew: Theme Park* (Utrecht: AAMU, 2008), 75–89.

<sup>20</sup> Unpublished interview with Tom Nicholson, 14 August 2008, Melbourne.

<sup>21</sup> Unpublished interview with Tom Nicholson.

<sup>22</sup> Unpublished interview with Tom Nicholson.



Tom Nicholson, *Marches for a May Day*, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist.

That something as simple as a public act of walking can bring such dissonant perspectives together, informed as they are by varying aesthetic and cultural customs, may clearly raise problematic viewpoints, as in the case of Kellerberrin. For Nicholson, however, such conjunctions can also spark potentialities, drawing together often isolated pasts – dissident and not, forgotten and canonical – in ways that question the frames of global art histories in much the same way as Terry Smith has argued: namely, to “think difference and connection at once... so as to capture the complexities of the relations... between them.”<sup>23</sup> It is important to note, though, that whereas Smith has insisted on capturing these relations and calcifying them within knowledge, Nicholson’s meetings of history are much more elusive and fragile, pending without conclusion, so that the surety of any one perspective or historical frame is perpetually suspended in doubt.

This was especially clear in another work from 2005, entitled *2pm Sunday 25 February 1862*. Here, Nicholson presented a series of posters proposing a march toward the town of Acheron – perhaps as a memorial to, or to re-enact, a moment in Australian colonial history of great yet (for some people) forgotten importance. This was the long march made by Wonga, Barak, and other Wurundjeri people (together with the Scottish missionary John Green) in the early 1860s from Wurundjeri to Taungurung country. A number of factors made this historical action remarkable: it was made in defiance of the Aboriginal Protection Board’s demands that the Wurundjeri stay where they were; its crossing of borders sparked the development of the transcultural Kulin nations between

<sup>23</sup> Terry Smith, “World Picturing in Contemporary Art: The Iconogeographic Turn,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 6.2/7.1 (2005/6): 27.



peoples of different countries; and it ultimately led to the establishment of the semi-autonomous station at Coranderrk, where the Kulin peoples were able, with relative prosperity, to conjoin their laws and practices with those of the settlers (that is, until the slow asphyxiation of Coranderrk by settler authorities towards the end of the nineteenth century)<sup>24</sup>. Regardless of whether his action was a memorial, a proposal for an event long-past, or a call for re-enactment, Nicholson intended for his proposal never to be actualised. If its retracing of dissidence in Australia suggested a foundation in the past for future transcultural relations, then that foundation had been ghosted by decades of neglect, retraced in turn by long histories of racist actions, and eroded by what Nicholson calls the “negligible intervention” of the poster<sup>25</sup>. If the poster proposed a meeting and a march by Wonga, Barak, and their families, then that projected march was not to come but nearly one-and-a-half centuries too late. Nicholson’s proposed meeting-point of different temporalities, actions, and cultures remained suspended, open and precarious, an uncertainty reinforced by disputes about the actual date of the Wurundjeris’ dissidence<sup>26</sup>.



Tom Nicholson, *Action for 2pm Sunday 6 July 1835*, 2005. Photo: Christian Capurro.  
Image courtesy of the artist

<sup>24</sup> On the history of Coranderrk station, see the important —and conflicting—accounts presented in Diane Barwick, *Rebellion at Coranderrk* (Canberra: Aboriginal History Inc., 1998) and Jane Lydon, *Eye Contact: Photographing Indigenous Australians* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 33–72 especially.

<sup>25</sup> Unpublished interview with Tom Nicholson.

<sup>26</sup> When Charles Walter photographed his own reconstruction of the event at Coranderrk in 1865, he dated the original action to 1862, whereas Jane Lydon claims the walk occurred in 1860. Jane Lydon, *Eye Contact*, 60ff.

In a similar vein, and again in 2005, Nicholson returned to another moment of transcultural possibility, pasting up thousands of posters across Melbourne over the course of ten nights (*Action for 2pm Sunday 6 July 1835*). These posters proposed a public meeting at Beangal, or Indented Head, near Melbourne, the site where the convict William Buckley – pictured on the poster – together with some of the Wathaurung people with whom he lived for thirty-two years after escaping from prison, met with Melbourne’s ‘founder’, John Batman. Again, Nicholson announced a meeting of potential transcultural politics from the past that both could and could not be for the future: that could provide an alternative concept of contemporary social relations, but which was proposed for 1835; and that could be seen by the public in the morning going to school or to work, but which could just as easily be torn down or pasted over before a broad public saw the announcement.

Two particular stakes can thus be drawn from such works. Much as we saw with Lia Perjovschi’s *CAA*, Nicholson steadfastly refuses to reaffirm the canon of (Western) art’s histories uncritically. While Nicholson makes frequent and pointed allusions to canonical practices past – to David, to Beuys, or to the *affichages sauvages* (or ‘wild posters’) made famous by Daniel Buren in late-1960s’ Paris – these ciphers of art’s canon are invariably rendered unstable, or even illegible, through their contact with ‘peripheral’ histories. Marat’s face is transformed into a series of smiling androgynies that are difficult to see when the banners flap in a breeze; the posters of Aboriginal protest are threatened with eradication as soon as they are made public. In other words, the contiguous histories within Nicholson’s works are not made easily digestible by virtue of being pictured through avant-garde ciphers – and here, Nicholson’s practice is the antithesis of Rakowitz’s picturing of Aboriginal politics – but seek to contest the kinds of representation through which we usually frame art, its histories, and, we might even argue, its broader social functions. There is no stable concept of history in Nicholson’s work. Instead, he asserts a desire to pull knowledge back into a knot of uncertainty, and to test the possible tensions between the spectres of dissident histories – of the Wathaurung and the whitefellas, as well as the Kulin and the Greens at Coranderrk, or of the revolutionary pictured in Nicholson’s banner marches – and their evanescence in the present. This is the second stake to note in his practice: a stake that hinges on finding potency in the fallible and the fleeting, and that insists that different perspectives of history should always haunt one another. Indeed, it is a stake that Nicholson makes especially clear in a time-lapse photograph that shows him pasting up a pair of posters – a trace of these haunting happenings in the middle of the night.

The question to ask now is: What actually emerges from Perjovschi’s and Nicholson’s practices? Each remobilises forgotten or nonconformist histories from their specific local contexts – Perjovschi reframes and remobilises Apartment Art from late-Communist Romania, while Nicholson’s proposals reframe and suggest the remobilisation of past collective action, especially between settler and displaced peoples in Australia. Each draws these histories together with established canons of art or situations familiar from other cultures, so as to test the possible connections and frictions that can emerge through contiguity. For Perjovschi, this has comprised dialogues and vigorous disputations within the *CAA*, so as to re-evaluate the multiple trajectories of art’s histories according to the perceptions presented by people from different locations worldwide. For Nicholson, the concurrence of his banner marches and proposed meetings refuses to divorce local trade-union movements from the image of Marat or processions of sacred and secular icons. Moreover, if the collective march

of workers cannot be thought in isolation from other historical contexts, as suggested by their retracing of imposed borders between countries, then perhaps we cannot isolate them from other historical marches, such as the Wurundjeris' defiance in crossing borders so as to develop the Kulin nations and their collective autonomy.

Of arguably greatest importance, though, are the possibilities for art history that emerge from these artists' works. This is not just in terms of the contiguities within each singular practice, but in the spirit of their methods, *between* each singular practice as well, even when (as in this instance) the artists may know little of each other. So what might it mean to think of the Bucharest-based Perjovschi and the Melbourne-based Nicholson together? The responses – or rather, the further questions that arise – may span a continuum from the broad to the relatively specific: Is it possible to consider the defiance of Australia's colonial norms – such as the Wathaurung's and Buckley's coexistence, or the development of Coranderrk – alongside distinct actions of dissidence toward the Communist state? Is the conjunction of these histories, and the focus on contiguity within and between artworks, a means of levelling difference for the sake of correlations between practices from different parts of the globe? Or is this communication of difference and contiguity a sharing of singular contexts, as Jean-Luc Nancy might argue – an openness to difference and interdependence that has no predetermined goal (unlike the profit-driven imperatives of neoliberal globalisation), but may nonetheless reveal a worldly interconnectedness that Nancy calls “mondialisation” (and which, in a similar vein, Gayatri Spivak considers a mode of “planetarity” rather than ‘globalisation’)?<sup>27</sup> What might this contiguity reveal about the after-image of previously distinct discourses, of post-Communism and postcolonialism, and the correlations or ongoing frictions between them?<sup>28</sup> And why, most importantly, are these spectral returns so insistent now?

For Jacques Derrida, these remainders from the past were also reminders of sorts: a reminder that, despite the implosion of Europe's Eastern Bloc, alternatives to a triumphalist neoliberalism were still possible, that new politics could still emerge to counter history's putative end. These were what he called the ‘spectres of Marx’, lurking within and through the globalisation of North Atlantic capital<sup>29</sup>. For Dipesh Chakrabarty, these remainders and their reframing of dominant social power and *its* construction of history were already considered by Marx; they were, Chakrabarty suggested, spectres *within* Marx<sup>30</sup>. For the artists in this paper, however, these hauntings are perhaps better understood as spectres *after* Marx, or the effects of different notions of Marx. They are the ghosts of nonconformism to Communist repression and of workers' collective actions for new conditions of labour. Indeed, these spectres are not

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> The possible conceptual, as well as historical, correlations between postcolonialism and post-Communism are only slowly beginning to emerge as crucial to social, cultural, and political historiographies of the recent past. This was clear, for example, in the full day of lectures devoted to precisely this topic at the first Former West conference, hosted by Maria Hlavajova from BAK (Basis voor Aktuele Kunst) and Charles Esche from the Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven) in Utrecht, The Netherlands, on 5 November 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Universalism and Belonging in the Logic of Capital,” *Public Culture* 12, no.3 (2000): 668–72, 676.

just after Marx, but spectres before Marx (as with William Buckley), or well beyond Marx's concepts (as with Wonga, Barak, and the persistence of the Kulin peoples). They are the revenants of displaced pasts from displaced 'peripheries', drawn together beyond the periods and places to which they have hitherto largely been confined. And they thus may be, in their own way – in their instigations of other concepts of 'history', and in the evanescent authority of their return – harbingers of another way of thinking 'the global', removed from the compatibilities, teleologies, and persistently Western hegemony that usually subtend its logic.

Indeed, we should remember here that the spectres I have considered in these pages neither speak for each other, nor do they speak over each other. Unlike a singular global art history, the practices of Perjovschi and Nicholson are too self-limiting to become hegemonic in themselves. While they present contiguities between specific local histories and other cultural contexts, the disputes, the delays, and the surfeit of possible referents through which these spectres return prevent a stable solidity to any perspective of history. This is not a weakness within or between these artists, though, but may be a significant strength. For what these contiguous histories may present is a fragile chorus of memory that, though recounting different pasts and told in diverse languages, can potentially come together to pierce the increasingly amnesic conditions of global neoliberalism and, in the process, reveal a hint of what future art histories may be.

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## **Spectre după Marx: Note despre istorii contigue ale artei contemporane**

Întrucât noțiunea de „istorie a artei mondiale” devine o disciplină majoră a istoriei artei, trebuie să fim atenți să nu repetăm ierarhiile, prezențiile și prejudiciile care au „infectat” istoria artei occidentale. Ar trebui să evităm mai ales subevaluarea acelor istorii care, în canon, obișnuiau să se numească „periferice”, „marginale” sau „neoccidentale”, dacă vrem să recunoaștem importanța acestor istorii. Articolul de față se concentrează asupra unor lucrări de artă contemporană și examinează modul în care artiștii înșiși au propus modele alternative de re-imaginare a istoriilor globale ale artei. Modelele respective se bazează nu pe includerea unei istorii sau a unui discurs într-altul, ci pe contiguitate. Într-adevăr, articularea și estetica istoriilor contigue poate fi un mijloc util de a regăsi urmele conexiunilor dintre postcomunism, postcolonialism și istoriile artei de după 1989, în loc de a marca doar diferențele ce le separă.