

Ray Bradbury Once Said...

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Sometime around 1989–90, in an interview for what was then still Czechoslovak TV, Ray Bradbury, the doyen of science fiction, said that we Czechs had finally joined the democratic world just as the Americans had once landed on the Moon. He went on to say that we would now be able to exchange metaphors – especially if a writer could become president – and by using these metaphors show each other how we envisaged our common future ... At that euphoric and revolutionary point in time art was inextricably merged, momentarily, with life. Public events transformed smoothly into cultural rituals, which in turn were transformed into political action. Similarly, the art collection of the Erste Group and the ERSTE Foundation, metaphorically called the Kontakt collection, plays an important role in the mutual exchange and translation of our metaphors. The collection is now ten years old, which represents a good occasion to remind ourselves of the collection's acquisition policy and its reconsideration of the art history of the ex-communist countries of Central and Southeastern Europe to the present day. And this, not to speak of Austria as a historical center, coordination point, and initiator of an array of cultural actions and activities.

These days, the Kontakt collection contains art that, from the start, focused on modernist and neo-avant-garde strategies, be these conceptual, performative, or neo-medial. Over the course of exhaustive internal and external critical discussions, the Kontakt advisory board has made every attempt to rectify authoritative judgments of so-called "Eastern art," and to offer new interpretative possibilities, and has been hugely pleased to reveal the "remote similarities" of both worlds, namely the former West and the former East. Drawing on a wealth of knowledge of the cultural scenes of individual countries of "real socialism," it has unearthed from an array of studios key works from the 1960s to the present day, many of which have the character of incunabula, initiatory acts far surpassing regional values and context. Mention should be made of the acquisition of representative works by the "erratic" personalities of individual art scenes, who to this day operate as important points of reference in the history of modern art. The result is a unique monument to cultural memory that will play an important role during the enormous changes to the social and political context that still await us. However, as is becoming clear today, it would have been difficult to predict the range of political and social tremors that came with the fall of communism, which have brought about epochal transformations throughout the whole of the post-communist and liberal democratic bloc. We were forced to redirect our aesthetic imagination, stimulate our recollection and reconditioning of the past. We are in a

transitional phase. We are experiencing the loss of the social and socialist project, the destabilization of collective work, and coming to terms with the curious appeal of a certain account of history. By the same token, many philosophers of history and social historians have shown that it is essential that we revise our understanding and perceptions of the historical turnaround of 1989–90 and conduct a root-and-branch rethink of both its significance and scope. The collapse of state socialism and the welfare state signaled the fact that industrial modernism has exhausted its utopian potential and that changes are both acquiring an extraordinary dimension and impacting the former East as acutely as they are the former West. Here mention should be made of certain critically engaged intellectuals, among them Charity Scribner and her publication *Requiem for Communism* of 2003, Croatian philosopher Boris Buden and his book *On the End of Postcommunism* from 2009, and Czech philosopher Václav Bělohradský and his regular philosophical and political essays. Buden expands on Scribner's thesis that, in the wake of the downfall of communism, we lack not only state socialism and the welfare state, but above all the collectively shared, unifying experience of collective work commonly acquired in the process of traditional industrial production.

At the same time, three fundamental processes are at work. The first is sadness, grief, nostalgia, not for an idealized communism, but for the missing collective experience of working in the production process—the assurance of solidarity that until recently created and secured a certain basis of society. Reflections on the revival of socialist or industrial forms and processes of material production provoke in Scribner a connection with the well-known passage from Marx's *The German Ideology*: that work does not simply serve to achieve external objectives and the satisfaction of material needs, but is an expression of human nature itself. As Marx wrote: "By producing their means of subsistence, men are indirectly producing their actual material life. [...] This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of individuals. Rather it is a definite form of the activity of these individuals, a definite form expressing their life. [...] As individuals express their life, so they are." An interest in the social and political essence of being in this respect is on one level connected with the question of whether it will be possible, during a time of crisis, to transfer and translate these utopian ideas and aspirations into culture and protect them in our cultural memory.

The second process is an epochal inversion of utopia that changes its original direction and becomes subject to a nostalgic longing for its own history. Whether it is possible to revive the socialist alternative, come to terms with the nostalgic draw of the past, activate collective forms or accept a universal virtuality are questions for a post-communist era coming to an end in general, and for the *Kontakt* collection in particular. At present, at the

supposed end of history, when time seems to have come to a standstill in an eternal present, utopia is being transformed into a desire for history. It is retroactive, and the possibility of a better world now opens up purely from a retro-utopian perspective. The third process involves the matrix of influences, affinities and contexts discussed by American curators such as Laura Hoptman. The catchwords atemporality, forever now, eternal presence are intended to convey the fact that this involves a phenomenon specific to Western culture, a “new state of the world,” in which all phenomena exist concurrently. As evidence of an eternal presence even St. Augustine is cited, along with his divine chronology in which everything is always already known: the present, past and future. Fantasy/science fiction writer William Gibson is also cited, who first used the term “atemporality” in 2003. But let us return to what might replace the epochal losses. According to the opinions cited, these losses, of which the most painful is the social, should be reactivated in the cultural memory and both inform and transcend the crisis. A key question for the exchange or translation of metaphors remains that posed by Buden: what will be the aesthetic answer to the current crisis within the context of the post-communist turn, when it has to translate its fantasies into the past in order to update the future in the present? Or what happens to our imagination when we find our way only in the retrospective mirror of culture, which is one of the main characteristics of retro-utopia? Nostalgia for a lost past can no longer be a return to values and traditions; these must be reconstructed without nostalgia. The current generation has neither the ideology nor even the programs we constructed for the postmodernism of the 1980s. Instead it is thrown back on the utilization of short-term strategies and builds its identity and freedom on a perpetually new and elusive self-identification, with concepts that no longer need be bound to place nor time, nor even to fixed relationships. The “associative status of identity” and its constant oscillation, described by the well-known sociologist Zygmunt Baumann, eases our burden some, while at the same time updating the traumatic problems that we have with memory and our sense of self-confidence, and which come with the compressing of past, present and future into a single moment—“now.”

Translated from the Czech by Phil Jones

References:

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This text was originally published in: *Kontakt*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln, 2017, p. 82–91.