

The Art of Anxiety and Anticipation from the Backyards of Cold War Superpowers

by **Michael Busch** on November 5, 2015



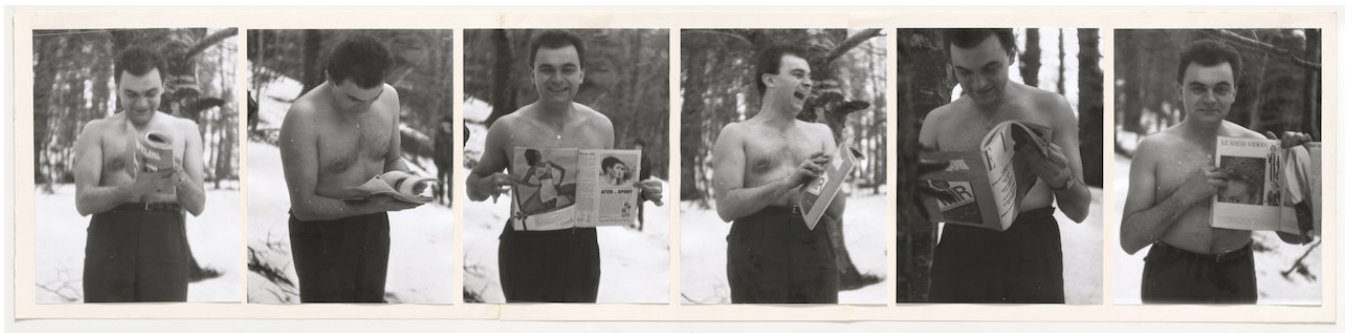
Installation view of 'Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980' (all photos courtesy The Museum of Modern Art)

The notion of Cold War “spheres of influence” is given a surprising twist in ***Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980***. The show, which recently opened at the Museum of Modern Art, makes the case that while Washington and Moscow devoted themselves to defending distinctly different visions of world order following World War II, artists laboring in the backyards of empire fashioned cross-cutting networks of aesthetic exchange and development. In the space of just 20 years, these connections would produce revolutionary change in art and society on both sides of the Atlantic.



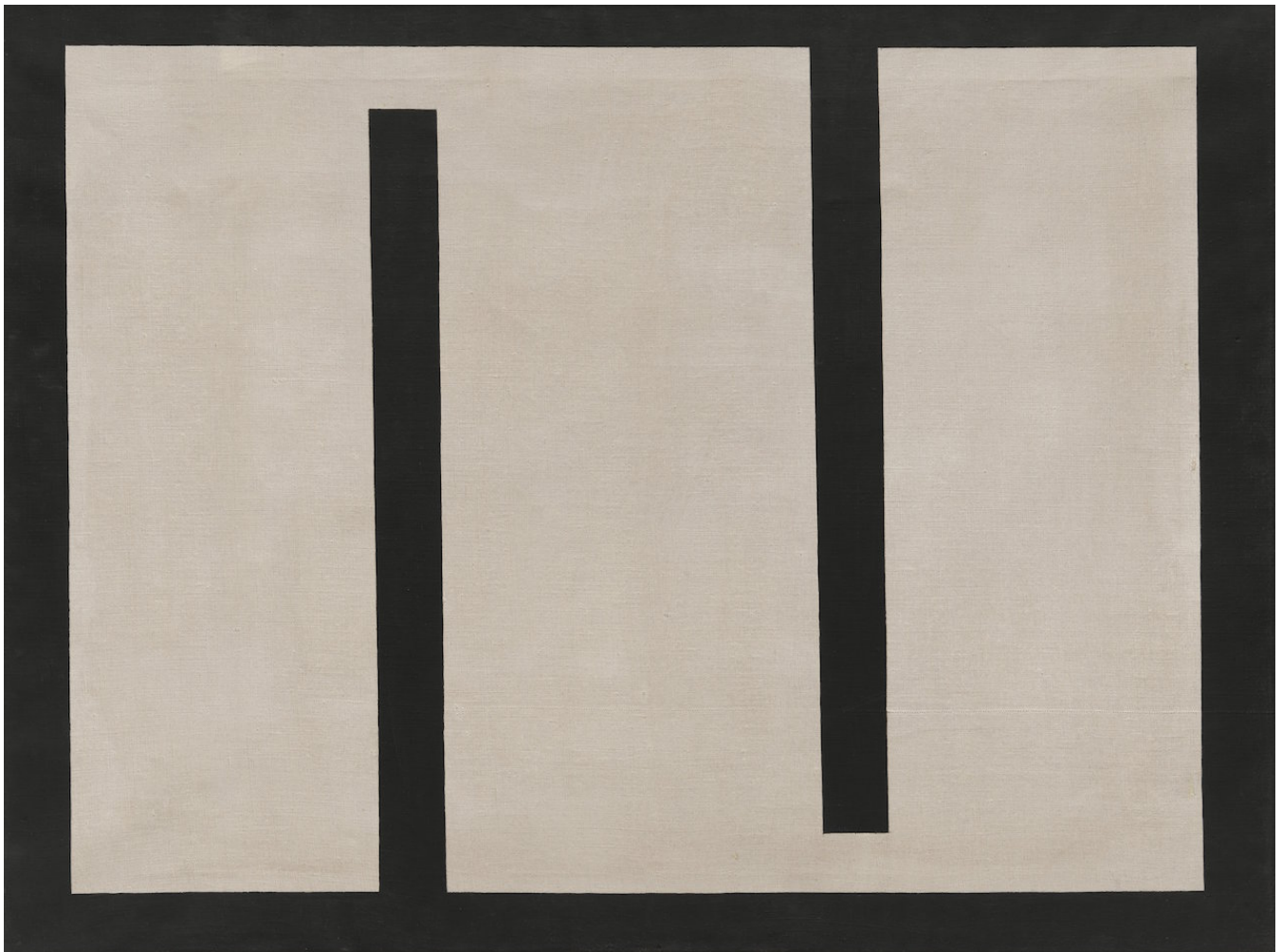
Mangelos (Dimitrije Bašicevic), "Manifest de la relation" (1976), synthetic polymer paint on globe made of plastic and metal

For all the rabble-rousing that would follow later in the decade, Latin American and Eastern European artists inaugurated the 1960s rather quietly. There was radicalism, to be sure, but it was directed largely at prevailing modernist traditions that had come to feel stale and stuffy. Reconsiderations of line, form, and perception animated an entirely new brand of work. Some of it, like the **sculptures** of Lygia Clark, is soft and subtle. Some — like that of Argentinian artist Lucio Fontana, who **slashed canvases** in signature acts of creative destruction, comes to mind — adopted a more confrontational style. There's little hint in any of it, however, that the stakes involved transcended the world of theory. This soon changed.



Tomislav Gotovac, "Showing Elle" (1962), six gelatin silver prints (click to enlarge)

As Cold War politics began to heat up along the peripheries of US and Soviet control, aesthetic preoccupations slowly started to give way to explicit engagement with the prevailing orders of power. Individual acts of resistance, like Tomislav Gotovac's *Showing Elle* — a series of photographs in which the Serbian artist strips himself partially naked on a wintry Croatian mountainside before flipping through an issue of *Elle* magazine — were made early in the decade but don't appear in *Transmissions* until the later galleries. Instead, the purely conceptual pieces that open the exhibit gradually give way to the increasingly political content animating work by artist collectives like the *Gorgona* group, which produced a handsome magazine series that is on view, and the Aktual Art group in Czechoslovakia.



Julije Knifer, "Meander No. 5" (1960), oil on canvas

But by 1968, a distinct attitudinal shift had taken hold. Product gave way to process as politics took

center stage. Vietnam, student uprisings, the Prague Spring, and military dictatorships in South America all fed the imaginations of those who were sick of the Cold War's competing hegemonies, as well as more ordinary sociopolitical realities of everyday life. Often the artists offer themselves up as the medium for dissent. In **"Action Pants: Genital Panic,"** for example, VALIE EXPORT sits wearing crotchless trousers, holding a machine gun, inviting a confrontation. Previously she had worn those pants into a Munich movie house, striding through the packed aisles so her crotch was level with the faces she passed.



Sanja Iveković, "In the Apartment, September 1975 / 'Elle,' March 1975" (1975), gelatin silver print, magazine page and typewritten text by the artist (click to enlarge)

Later, Sanja Iveković would use her body to reveal the surveillance state governing life in the former Yugoslavia with **"Triangle,"** represented here by four photographs and accompanying text reading: "The action takes place on the day of President Tito's visit to [Zagreb] and it develops as intercommunication between three persons." The first picture is, presumably, a state agent standing on the roof of a tall building across the street from Iveković's apartment. The second is a policeman on the street below. The third is the artist herself, lounging on her balcony, drinking whiskey, reading a book, and pretending to masturbate. Within minutes, the police are at Iveković's door, demanding that "the persons and objects are to be removed from the balcony."



David Lamelas, “Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels: The Visual Image, Text and Audio” (1968/2015), office furniture, telex, tape recorder, microphone, telephone receivers, text, Plexiglas partition, and performance

Not everything in the show finds its footing so effectively. David Lamelas’s **“Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels: The Visual Image, Text and Audio”** takes up the better part of an entire gallery, but it doesn’t pack much punch for all the attention it’s given. Edward Krasinski’s **“Interventions with Blue Tape,”** a gallery filled with ho-hum objects connected by a single line of blue tape, is as pretentious as it is boring. The politics are bad, too: To the extent that he ever discussed the purpose of covering things in blue tape, Krasinski justified it as a way or “marking” his territory — a sentiment seemingly at odds with the radical intent of the other artists in this show. For the most part, though, the works assembled hit the mark.

Within the space of a few short years, two distinct branches of art seem to emerge. The first sallies forth in the spirit of 1968, announcing itself defiantly in the face of American influence and calling out the sociopolitical inequities of capitalism. There’s no finer example of this than the gallery of **vibrant posters** advertising South America protests, political organizations, plays, and other events in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, the arrangement presented here testifies beautifully to the fine balance between politics and culture achieved by Latin American graphic design during this period



Oscar Bony, "La Familia Obrera (The Working Class Family)" (1968), gelatin silver print

Nearby, a string of works — including Marisol's **"Family,"** Fernando Botero's **"Presidential Family,"** and Oscar Bony's **"Working Class Family"** — fearlessly critique the intersections between markets, social structures, and desire. The opposition between Botero's roly-poly elites and the photo of Bony's working-class family — paid by the artist to sit all day in a gallery at rates higher than what the family would normally earn — is particularly striking. But nothing can compete with Marisol's **"Love,"** a small, demanding sculpture depicting a woman choking down a bottle of Coca-Cola — a piece embedded with all the attendant sexual innuendo and critique of consumption one would expect.



Marisol (Marisol Escobar), "Love" (1962), plaster and glass (Coca-Cola bottle) (click to enlarge)

Things couldn't be more different in a second group of work featured just before *Transmissions* comes to a close. Here, none of the flamboyance of the previous galleries is evident; the work is dark and inward-looking. The pieces suggest a deep sense of isolation and retreat from politics — perhaps reflective, in the case of Eastern Europe, of authoritarianism's tightening grip. Geta Bratescu's "[Medea's Hypostases](#)," a series of muted, abstract textile drawings rendered with a sewing machine, are the most colorful objects on view. The rest of the artists featured — [Bela Kolarova](#), [Liliana Porter](#), and [Luis Camnitzer](#) — seem intent on returning to postmodernist concerns of an earlier period when the stakes weren't possibly life threatening.

The show leaves off in 1980, the final turning point in the tortured history of Cold War politics. By then, revolutionaries had taken power in Nicaragua and Iran, but so had Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher — neoliberalism's most zealous field marshals — in the United States and Great Britain. Russia's foreign policy nightmare was just beginning in Afghanistan, while Solidarity's victories in Poland signaled the beginning of the end for Soviet communism in Eastern Europe. And, in fact, the U.S.S.R. would be gone by the end of the decade, prompting self-satisfied liberals to declare the "end of history."

But that's all still a world away as *Transmissions* concludes. Right now, there's only anxiety and anticipation.

[Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980](#) continues at the Museum of Modern Art (11 West 53rd Street, New York) through January 3, 2016.

Cold WarLatin AmericaMoMA