

Review: ‘Transmissions’ at MoMA Explores an Era When Art Upended Tradition

By **HOLLAND COTTER** SEPT. 3, 2015

A visit to “Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960-1980,” a big, spirited group show that opens on Saturday at the Museum of Modern Art, is like walking into a party of extremely personable strangers conversing on subjects you can’t quite make out. For every name you recognize, there are 10 you don’t. Multiple languages — Czech, Romanian, Slovak, Spanish, Portuguese, as well as English — fill the air. As for topics discussed, art, poetry, film and theater seem to be getting about equal time.

One thing everyone’s talking about, at different intensities, is politics, namely the anti-institutional politics that took the form of mass civil disobedience throughout Europe and the Americas in the 1960s and led to new forms of art. And on that subject almost everyone speaks and shares an aesthetic language, the language. It’s the language of Conceptualism, which, with an accent on ideas over things, process over results, ephemeral over permanent, arrived at this critical time, spreading across a pre-Internet globe through a kind of cultural telepathy.

It’s important that MoMA has elected to kick off its season with this show. Others would have been more inviting. (Picasso is on the way.) But in the past

several years, the museum has begun — just — to expand its antique Paris-New York view of Modernism. “Transmissions” confirms the move in that realistic direction. Significantly, about half the works are recent acquisitions.

Playing catch-up brings problems, one being the impulse to do too much too fast. An earlier show and model for this one, “Tokyo 1955-1970: A New Avant-Garde,” in 2012, presented so much new material that some viewers felt swamped. I didn’t; I loved every mind-stretching minute. I also saw the need to present comparable material regularly, in focused shows. Such shows already exist, just waiting to be realized.

Much of the “Tokyo” exhibition came from previously untapped areas of MoMA’s collection. “Transmissions” is, with six exceptions, all-MoMA, and, like the earlier show, a product of an in-house initiative called Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives, or C-MAP. Introduced in 2009, the initiative encourages MoMA staff to study holdings long overlooked, largely by networking with scholars and institutions in Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and elsewhere. This means that curators may be exploring ground new to them, just steps ahead of their audience, which gives the C-MAP shows a refreshing, in-progress air, a buzz of surprise.

And, yes, “Transmissions” does hit you with a ton of stuff, about 300 pieces, from large installations to note-scrawled bits of paper, with a concentration on photographs and film. Stylistically, the look is loose. How could it not be, with cultures located half a globe apart brought together? But the basic narrative is fairly tight. From the 1960s onward, parts of Latin America and Eastern Europe were in comparable states of political turmoil, under repressive governments, with avant-garde art under fire. And that art had risen in the larger international context of disillusionment with prewar Modernism, and, specifically, abstract painting — once progressive, but now safe and state-approved.

Something had to give, and in the show’s first gallery, we find artists

pushing abstraction around, messing it up. Lygia Clark, in Brazil, turns sculpture, once sacrosanct on pedestals, into a species of hand-held device. The Argentine-born Lucio Fontana slashes his canvases; the Brazilian Willys de Castro makes his pencil-thin. Jésus Rafael Soto, a Venezuelan transplant to Europe, adds vibrating wires to paintings. An émigré in the opposite direction, Gertrud Goldschmidt, known as Gego, gives wire sculptures the grace of drawings. Julio Le Parc, an Argentine in France, sidesteps conventional media entirely to create little theaters of flashing, shifting light.

As the 1960s went on, and political and economic crises deepened worldwide, art behaved in increasingly unruly ways, with traditional priorities upended. Objects became optional; actions, central. Individual artists melded into collectives. In Caracas, a collective of artists, poets and critics called El Techo de la Ballena (The Roof of the Whale) took to the streets with aggressively anarchic, bourgeoisie-baiting performances — one was called “A Tribute to Necrophilia” — which they documented with snapshots.

Dozens of these pictures, time-scorched, are enshrined in the show’s second gallery, surrounded by relics of Eastern European collectives like the Gorgona Group in Zagreb, Croatia, and Aktual Art in Prague, which both had impressive individual members. I’d like to know more about Aktual Art’s Sonia Svecova, based on a few zany collages and an artist’s book here. Her colleague Milan Knizak is more generously represented: He created dozens of actions in the form of written notes placed in numbered envelopes, and MoMA has his entire file. Although there isn’t much here by the interesting Gorgona member Josip Vanista, maybe that’s just as well: He spent most of his career drawing single, horizon-like lines on paper.

“What was left out of a drawing was more important than what was put into it,” he said in an interview. “It led to simplicity, to reduction, to emptiness. And then to silence.”

Silence can be a commanding political tool: It can leave an opponent

having to guess what you're thinking. And, of course, speech is even more effective. David Lamelas of Argentina used it with particular force in his "Office of Information About the Vietnam War at Three Levels: The Visual Image, Text and Audio," created for the 1968 Venice Biennale. An installation of a kind of corporate workplace sealed in a glass box, the piece generated live broadcasts, in three languages, on the war. No aesthetic removal here; this was art in the bad-news now. (The version of the piece in the show is a recent replica, using audiotapes from the original.)

By the time he made this piece, Mr. Lamelas had been jailed four times by the military police in Buenos Aires. In 1968, he moved to London. Other artists stayed home and marked rebel territory where they were. In the same year, in Vienna, the feminist artist Valie Export stopped traffic when she appeared in public wearing crotchless pants. (Born Waltraud Lehner, she took her professional name from a brand of cigarettes.)

Marisol Escobar's 1962 sculpture "Love," with an upside-down Coke bottle jammed into a woman's mouth, is still a shocker. And in Argentina, Oscar Bony caused a scandal when he hired a working-class family to pose in a gallery, then paid them twice the pittance the father made on his regular job. In a stroke, economic realities were revealed. The government, embarrassed, clamped down. Mr. Bony retreated from art making for seven years.

And some artists routinely worked in retreat. In Bucharest, Romania, during the punishing regime of Nicolae Ceausescu, Geta Bratescu and Ion Grigorescu each made films in which they were the only performers, strictly within the privacy of their studios. In Mr. Grigorescu's 1978 tour de force, "Dialogue With President Ceausescu," the artist plays the roles of interviewer and interviewee and gets to say exactly what he wants to a man he despises, fears and will never meet.

Mr. Grigorescu's film comes at the end of the show, which has been organized by a suite of MoMA curators, including Stuart Comer, Roxana

Marcoci and Christian Rattemeyer, with two curatorial assistants, Giampaolo Bianconi and Martha Joseph. And by the time you've reached his piece, you've probably made a bunch of new friends; you've certainly been in contact with some extraordinary artists: Artur Barrio, Beatriz González, Tomislav Gotovac, Sanja Ivekovic, Jiri Kovanda, Edward Krasinski, Marta Minujin, Ewa Partum and Henryk Stazewski, not to mention a slew of brilliant graphic designers. Yet you may still feel on unfamiliar ground, because they are all part of an art world very different from the one we know now.

It was one in which some artists — those in this exhibition, anyway — took it as part of their job not to cooperate with powers of rule; to question all authority, including the authority of pleasure, the market and self; to approach art as a place set aside for asking questions and proposing answers that won't be asked or proposed elsewhere. This kind of thinking is unpopular now, which doesn't mean it's not true. That's why we need MoMA to give us true history. We need role models, whole house parties of them, to remind us of what's been so we'll know how to go. That's what history's for.

“Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960-1980” runs through Jan. 3 at the Museum of Modern Art; 212-708-9400, moma.org.

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