# Editors' Note: Formering the West

In July of 1992, a group gathered at a five-star hotel in Venice to draft an event that can be seen to model the contours of what we know today as global contemporary art. Convened a year in advance of the 45th Venice Biennale by then artistic director Achille Bonito Oliva, the meeting brought together the commissioners of the national pavilions that would participate in the first Biennale since the events of 1989—the so-called democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe that had brought down historical communism and ended the Cold War, and with it, the tripartitioning of the world into first, second, and third. The world was rapidly changing, opening up possibilities that were but a short time ago beyond imagination. And art would not be left behind. What Bonito Oliva suggested was a radical adjustment of the very logic of the world's oldest art fair: to transnationalize—globalize, even—the Venice Biennale by dispelling its central doctrine of national representation and the persisting asymmetries between the west[1] and what had, in the meantime, come to be the former east and global south. Concretely, he invited the commissioners to welcome into their national pavilions artists of other countries, specifically those without pavilions of their own.

An artwork—*Garden Program* (1993) by artist Andrea Fraser, herself a non-Austrian exhibiting in the Austrian pavilion—bears witness to this meeting as a moment of utter uncertainty and confusion. As her

ingenious contribution, Fraser installed a sound piece made with edited recordings of the commissioners' meeting, providing us with a crucial primary source of the art world politics of the time. From fascinating exchanges, shaped with a vocabulary still too tentative to grasp the weight of the historical moment, we hear that not all commissioners were excited about Bonito Oliva's proposal. Those from the countries that had just emerged from post-World War II Soviet dominion would not let go of the opportunity—no, the right—to represent their national cultures and significant artists on a level field with western nations. Unable to "discard" the certitudes of the past as blithely as its victors urged, they first demanded full inclusion into the western art system, and did not want to share the small space that had just opened within it. The relative European periphery needed first to catch up with the "now" and its structures of competition, its art market, and its increasingly global landscape of institutions. And then there were those absent, yet "pressing to get in to participate," in Bonito Oliva's words,[2] mainly from the global south: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, Nigeria, Paraguay, Peru, South Africa, Zimbabwe . . .

This vision of an art event "free of nationalist pride and chauvinist policies"—an opportunity presented by what looked like a new geopolitical condition of the *one* world—seemed, for a moment at least, like it would come true. It was, however, quickly deflated by reality. The Cold War may have been over, but the imaginary of the one—"common"—world took a course in which the so-called west continued its routine of presuming itself as the "first" among what were supposed to have become its—albeit heterogeneous—equals. The stakes, clearly, were much higher than the question of who would show what and where in the lagoon of Venice: How to conceive of a global condition, in which the west and its hegemony are called into crisis and into question? How to make the west former, and embody—live through—such a proposition?

## Art and the Contemporary

The 45th Venice Biennale was, to be sure, but one of many launching points for the manifold trajectories that art and the contemporary would take in the aftermath of 1989, which are considered in this book. Yet, as an event with ongoing worldwide resonance, it effectively registers not only the spatial coordinates of the emerging era's global transnational condition, but also its temporal base. Consider this: under the conception of postmodernism, which then still held currency, cultural self-reflection epitomized historical being, even though this mode was believed to have already exhausted its critical potentials; at the same time, postcolonial studies had powerfully revealed how definitively the colonial legacy still structured the new global condition; and, in 1989, geopolitical strategist Zbigniew Brzeziński, one of the most prominent anti-communists of the



Cold War, announced the arrival of the new post-communist era. The time was suddenly post-ideological, post-utopian, and even post-political. Finally, in the same year, political scientist Francis Fukuyama dared to call history itself into post-existence.

Art, curiously, insisted that instead of being rendered "post," it would become fully *contemporary*. Rather than succumbing to the seductions of general retrospection, it claimed to actively share time with the rapidly changing world. This time, at odds with itself, would not be a singular temporal condition, but rather the heterogeneous simultaneity of clashing and conjoining temporalities, in which no cultural or geopolitical time-space would stay in its proper place—not even the west. It was a condition of self-generating contradictions in which art both participated and competed in a transnational setting, while simultaneously representing the national identities and histories the new setting was supposed to transcend. Moreover, it was a place marked by different levels of integration into the matrix that is contemporary art and political economy, with the creation and blurring of new peripheries and centers, rooted in a mixed economy of national art councils that mingled seamlessly with private foundations, dealers, and collectors from all around the world. Critically, it was a space that contained different temporal arenas—those of the included and of the not-yet-included; of the newly (re)discovered and of the soon-to-be-forgotten—all happening concurrently, with historical artworks presented as contemporary and contemporary artworks quoting historical styles and forms. This is the composition of the art world as it has been installed since 1989. We suggest giving this constellation a name: *former west*.

For *in spite of* the way the west has gone seemingly uninterrupted through the tectonic shifts and planetary recompositions that have followed 1989, we want to stake a claim against the west's continued hegemony in the global context of the world. How, we want to inquire, do art and the contemporary—as they have been shaped and have themselves shaped the space-time condition of the world after 1989—relate to this so-called west? A west that has not become "former" like its supposed counterpart, the former east? A west that must undoubtedly be challenged by probing new distinctions, specifically those of the global north and global south, and by collapsing the post-communist condition with the postcolonial constellation? How can art, then, *former* the west, not only in some conceptual fiction, but also as a project of fact, thus both imagining and inhabiting the west's *formerness*?

## The Former

The term "former west" has previously surfaced here and there within the art of the last two or so decades; in, for example, the proposition artist Shelly Silver has articulated in her project *Former East/Former West*

(1994), or through the critical discursive query posed in 2000 by art theorist Igor Zabel: "Writers often speak about the 'former East,' intending to stress that they speak about a region which used to be a different world, while now this difference is abolished. They never, however, speak about the 'former West' . . ."[3]

While our proposition of a former west divorces the simplistic dichotomy of east versus west, it nevertheless owes its name to the designation "former east" and the revolutions in once-communist Europe that have inaugurated that term and made 1989 the birth year of our time's reigning historical paradigm. In 1990, while these events were still unfolding, philosopher Jürgen Habermas subordinated the various meanings of the 1989/1990 reorderings to a single objective: "the catch-up revolution."[4] Its ultimate goal, he believed, was in clearing the way for the economic and political development that would allow the east to be fully incorporated into the capitalist world order. Roughly speaking, Habermas' conception is premised on the idea that the east had been prevented by communism from following a standard trajectory of historical development, and that now, after the obstacle had been removed, it would seek to catch up with the west. That was all. The "revolution" hadn't brought anything new to the world, not one single innovative idea with which to shape the future. Attached to the east, "former" thus qualifies a geographic space with a teleological temporality. It evokes an east that has liberated itself from communism, but not from its past. Yet this past has been itself of no historical value, for history had left teleology behind. The former east was now the scene of a belated, non-historical present, whose only future was somewhere else's already-existing reality.

The social, political, and economic meaning of such a non-historical temporality is best epitomized in the notion of the "transition to democracy," a euphemism for this brutal wave of primitive accumulation of capital. It has been generated on a double political front: the radical transformation of property relations through the often criminal privatization of previously state- or socially-owned instruments of production, and the destruction not only of the institutions of the socialist welfare state, but of society itself, which was to be replaced by identitarian communities. Beyond the pathos of democratic liberation, the transition relentlessly pursued its primary goal: the neoliberal integration of the economies of the post-communist east into western-cum-global capitalism and the subjection of political sovereignty to the rule of transnational agencies—a goal that was successfully achieved without liberating the east from the adjective former.

Besides denoting this period of delay in the historical development of the Enlightenment project, the notion of formerness can also be seen to mean something rather different, namely, a relation of domination that is completely at odds with the supposed teleology of emancipation. To call the post-communist east "former" means, first of all, to deny its



right to the same present as the west. At stake is not simply a problem of historical synchronicity, but rather of an active, practical sharing of time. This is why the catch-up revolution must be seen to have failed. The common stakes of an emancipatory transformation can be articulated only within a shared temporality. And only within a shared temporality can the divide between west and east (and, by extension, the global south) be abolished in a common emancipatory praxis. Yet the division has survived, finding its afterlife in the temporal mode of formerness, which has only rearticulated the old geopolitical differences in much deeper cultural, and even anthropological, senses. Not only has the east failed to happily join the west in the global fulfillment of the grandiose ideals of Enlightenment, it has osmosed across the old Cold War tear into the heterogeneous time-space of the former Third World. The former east has now joined what Stuart Hall once called "the Rest,"[5] sharing in the traumatic temporal legacy of the Third World's colonial histories and the burden of a chronic belatedness that demands the ceaseless acceleration of catch-up modernization. Behind a resurrected teleology of emancipation appears its hidden capitalist truth, the crude developmentalism of globalist modernity. In this sense, the idea of the catch-up revolution might provide a key for understanding other so-called democratic revolutions that have occurred in the aftermath of 1989, the ones that will be likely remembered by their colorful names such as "orange" or "rose." This also applies to what we know as the Arab Spring, whose outcome has turned into something other than a primary step toward the progressively better. Indeed, we could maybe even talk instead about progress toward a novel worse.

The revolutions of 1989/1990 have been only halfway revolutions. They have labored to change the various pasts of the west without challenging its present—a western present that has been seen to mark their endpoint even though it was itself totally petrified in its posthistorical temporality, containing now not only its own unrealized and unrealizable potentials of another future, but also the other, different presents of "the Rest." The west has remained alive because the moment of its self-abolition has been missed. This, too, is why we should former the west today: to remember that it has failed to catch up with a revolution of its own.

The year 1989, then, is of critical importance, but it cannot serve as an instructive origin point of periodization. It rather marks a moment of trauma—the dislocation of the modern points of orientation—and the entry into a state of shock, in which a supposedly common historical temporality is dissolved and multiplied. We may thus all share that enthusiastic picture of the freedom-loving masses that came together over the ruins of the Berlin Wall, but our understandings of its meaning diverge widely. If the Cold War did not simply end, but was rather won by one side—the capitalist-democratic west—then the geopolitical turn that has been brought about by 1989 means a move from bipolarity to

unipolarity, and, consequently, to an absolute global hegemony of the west. From another perspective, however, a very different claim can be made about the same event, namely that, at the end of the Cold War, the west was already in decline—not only economically and politically, but also in its ideological efficacy, having long ago ceased modeling an ideal to be followed. This notion then implies the end of indisputable western hegemony over the world at the same time that it consecrates and universalizes a certain nostalgia for the time when the west, as a geopolitical entity, enjoyed socio-political stability, economic prosperity, cultural superiority, and even, especially on its European side, social welfare. This could, then, be a story about the rise and fall of the west—accurately noted by sociologist and social theorist Immanuel Wallerstein as "the decline of the West"[6]—making it, in effect, former, in the sense of *post*, meaning both *after* and *in result*.

The inquisitive adjective "former" thus seems to epitomize such a contradictory condition by encircling the incommensurable meanings it itself generates. If, in the case of the former east, as we have seen, it has been deployed as a temporal marker in the social relations of domination, it can be attached today with the same meaning to anything in the universe of global capitalism—to divide people or disunite our political struggles. This is what feminist theorist Nancy Fraser has called a post-socialist condition, in which contestation continues without an overarching emancipatory project of social redistribution or cultural recognition. To assign something the adjective "former" serves a global function as a deterritorialized border built with expropriated time. Dispossessed time However, with the same vigor and permeability of its abstract temporality, the term can probe remaining hegemonies—such as the west's persisting primacy in the political, social, economic, and cultural fields—all the while being nested in a conceptual westcentrism that, bundled with global capitalism, travels the world over. With this understanding, former west is decidedly not a concept we wish to develop, but a constellation, a *device* to help make sense of the incessant present, and to think and live through its alternatives.[7] This, we believe, is its true strength.

## Method

The former west we posit with this book is an abstract prism: a conceptual multi-tool to negotiate the conditions of the contemporary, which combines the functions of critique and proposition. Its critical purpose is to offer a specific cartography of the post-1989 present: seeking to collapse the post-communist condition with the postcolonial constellation, and navigate in parallel the cultural, political, and environmental upheavals that structure the present moment and the post-ideological, posthuman, and posthistorical formations that have emerged in artistic and intellectual response. For, as has become clear, at stake is the aftermath of the competition between west and east that defined most of the twentieth century—a contest, however, not primarily between two ideological blocs, but between two variants of western modernity. It is, indeed, this west-centered outlook of the world, leaning on its economic, technological, political, and epistemological infrastructures of power and domination—as well as the resilient universalization of its narratives—that a formering of the west seeks to undo. And it is precisely in this *formering* that the project takes up its propositional function, as an active effort of seeking alternatives and prospects to strive toward.

The contributions to this book follow either the route of critique or proposition, yet most oscillate between the two, embracing the non-consensual and non-evidentiary quality of the former west condition, its coming into being, its demise, or its promise. If, therefore, the book sits uncomfortably between existing academic disciplines and within the so-called art world, it is because it seeks precisely to inhabit the interstices of normative categories of knowledge. As far as contemporary art can be viewed as a system, its historical form should reveal the contours of the contemporary as such, both in terms of economy and politics, but also, although more abstractly, in terms of history and futurity. If the contemporary is the category in which the temporal unity of our global modernity is articulated, then the fact that what is today called "contemporary art" concurs with the final globalization of capitalism is no coincidence. This is why essays in history, political economy, and cultural production can be gathered here around art to productively participate in a totalization of our historical experience, which, however random and contingent, is necessary for any articulation of critique. The book's methodology itself thus derives from the crucial mode of today's artistic practices. A culmination of an eight-year curatorial research experiment, this book continues with the *curatorial* method it has embraced from the outset: one of creating assemblages of works, practices, and discourses that consciously bring together varied elements into heterogeneous, even contradictory, constellations. It deliberately takes art for thought, and vice versa, in the sense of what literary critic and political theorist Fredric Jameson calls, simply, *theory*. He, too, employs theory as a curatorial practice of sorts, selecting different theoretical and philosophical elements and putting them together in a quasi-conceptual installation.[8] As a curatorial intervention into the contemporary, this book then asks how the contemporary can be imaged and imagined. Each of its seven chapters creates a particular point within the overall entanglement, and is itself composed as an installation of positions, possibilities, approaches, and disciplines. Together, these chapters negotiate the space of art, as it has emerged since the events of 1989, as being one in which we can think of the contemporary as a historical condition—whether as style, period, or infrastructure. This is elaborated in the chapter titled "1989,

Art, and the Contemporary," which provides divergent definitions of the contemporary as a historical fact and an art historical period tied in a variety ways to the symbolic year of 1989. The following chapter's focus on "Timing the Former" deals with the problem of history in its western guise: not only its insistence on linearity and universality, but also the adjacent obsessive fascination with the past that marks current culture and politics with retrospection and regression. Developed consecutively in "Understructures" and "Toward Another Political Economy?," the book twines art and the contemporary with inquiry into both the conceptual architecture of the present and its political economy. The term "understructures" is employed, instead of the familiar terms "superstructure" or "basis," to describe the devices that install the former west into lived reality, while the subsequent chapter tries to inscribe the former west as a new mode of political economy. The book then goes on to examine the related questions of power, truth, and resistance—in particular, the reality of infrastructure "after the Internet." Opening up a discussion of the implications of algorithmic cultures and the posthuman condition, the chapter "Power and Truth (After the Internet)" recalls how 1989 has also been the birth year of the Internet as we have come to know it, and how this has affected not just the dissemination and circulation of information, but also, markedly, the production of truth itself. The effects of contemporary infrastructures on notions of collectivity and solidarity in the present, and the tectonic impact of contemporary migration—in particular, the so-called "refugee crisis" and the larger process of global class recomposition—are then considered in "Constructions of the 'We,'" a chapter framed by an underlying question of how to formulate a new collective subject. As an empty signifier, "we" is always a particular "we" staking claim to universality, so, the chapter inquires into how this signifier can be constructed in the times of the former west. Finally, the prospective trajectories assembled in the last chapter, "Prospects," appeal to art's critical potential to institute the contemporary it envisions from within such a cartography, in spite of its time(s), and while encountering in this mission both roadblocks and roadmaps, possibilities and impossibilities. The purpose of this book is to propose a former west, and thus a formering of the west. This is a way of describing our actuality, of opening up another—prospective—discourse on the contemporary, and, thus, perhaps paradoxically, on the contemporary's future.

## Crises, Former and Current

In 1931, existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers wrote *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (*"The Spiritual Situation of the Age"*). Published shortly before the Nazis took power in Germany and then across almost the entirety of Europe, the book is a statement on the time of crisis that gave rise to European fascism and consequently developed into the catastrophe of World War II. Yet the book also announces the ideal of a world in which the dualism between the west and its "others" would disappear on the common horizon of humankind. Almost a century on, former west envisions a similar ideal posited against its own time of crisis. Distressingly, a number of contributions to this book address the creeping normalization of contemporary fascisms, both neo and post, as a consequence—directly or implicitly—of the absent prospect of a world without cruel divisions (the perpetuated dualism between the west and its "others" among them). In its incessant present, the west seems condemned to replay its pasts, marked by devastating patterns of nationalism, racism, and xenophobia, in ever more brutal reiterations. Vis-à-vis such acute crises, we see the political purpose of former west as assisting the process of critique, creating distance from habits of self-appointed superiority in the west, and seeking ways, instead, to be included in a broad planetary register of artistic, epistemological, and political options of social emancipation.

To return briefly to our opening example and the minor crisis in the artistic construction of the contemporary as it unfolded in preparation for the 45th Venice Biennale: rehearsed as a quandary around national representation in face of the emerging global-transnational prospects, the meeting resulted in a strange conciliation. Characteristic of the art world through to today, the commissioners settled on a compromise of *international nationalism*—international in reach, yet national in origin, publicly funded, yet privately sold. Today, it is not remembered for what it was historically: a moment when the opportunity to abolish old routines of blatant, triumphant displays of extant divisions—national or otherwise—was passed up; but rather for its *Aperto* ("open") section, the exhibition for young artists, which was to become the last one presented in Venice. It featured a range of artists who would come to define contemporary art in the ensuing decades, effectively inaugurating the primacy of emerging artists to the growth of the art market. If the Venice Biennale as such could not achieve its historical goal and thus disappear, as it should have, then *Aperto '93* did achieve its goal of introducing and integrating new artists, which is why it could be abandoned. While the format of *Aperto* was factually formered, the Biennale lives on in all its former glory. But within its contradictions, we can see the symptoms of larger conflicts that are not only cultural. Indeed, these contradictions lie unresolved, stuck between the new and the old in a seemingly never-ending interregnum, continuously haunting the contemporary.

As a sensitive instrument, former west names the current crisis and catalogues the morbid symptoms that political thinker Antonio Gramsci has noticed appear in such moments when there is no way forward and no way back. It is this monstrosity of our time—the generalized spread of fear and perpetuation of atrocity across the globe and the planet—that makes us aware of the urgency of decision. For, in its Greek origin, crisis means

precisely that: the moment of decision. This book gestures toward this urgency. While doing so from within the field of art, it becomes clear that it is not so much a matter of how art exists in a particular historical time, but it is about how art conditions the very temporality of this historical moment. Grasping—*with* and *through* art—the contemporary, together with the artists, theorists, and activists contributing to this volume, we seek to move beyond the present conundrum, and challenge it, in spite of its time and as if it were possible.

1. We choose to expressly use the lower case when referring to the geographical and geopolitical determinations within our discussion, bringing into question the previously settled symbology of the conventionally capitalized noun "west." Contributors to the book, however, differ in this respect, some choosing to capitalize such terms in order to indicate their constructed and contested nature. We embrace the performative dimensions of the chosen approach to capitalization of each author, and see this destabilizing of terminology as precisely the kind of problematic that FORMER WEST seeks to confront.
2. Andrea Fraser, "Garden Program," in *Representatives – Austrian Contribution to the 45th Biennale of Venice 1993*, ed. Helmut Draxler (Vienna: Bundesministerium für Unterricht und Kunst, 1993), p. 186.
3. Igor Zabel, "Dialogue," in *2000+ Arteast Collection: The Art of Eastern Europe: A Selection of Works for the International and National Collections of Moderna galerija Ljubljana*, Zdenka Badovinac and Peter Weibel, eds. (Bolzano: Folio Verlag, 2001), p. 30.
4. We use the term "the catch-up revolution" as the English translation of Jürgen Habermas' concept of "*die nachholende Revolution*"; the other frequently used translation, "the rectifying revolution," ignores the temporal dimension of the term. See Habermas, "What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking on the Left," *New Left Review*, no. 183 (September/October 1990), pp. 3–21. We refer here to the original: Habermas, "Nachholende Revolution und linker Revisionsbedarf. Was heißt Sozialismus heute?," in *Die nachholende Revolution* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990), pp. 179–203.
5. Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power," in *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 185.
6. Immanuel Wallerstein, "Precipitate Decline: The Advent of Multipolarity," *Harvard International Review* (Spring 2007), pp. 54–59.
7. In line with this proposition, the contributors of this book deploy the device "former west" in manifold meanings and diverse interpretations.
8. See Fredric Jameson, "The Aesthetics of Singularity," *New Left Review*, no. 92 (March/April 2015), pp. 101–132.