

ART IN DEMOCRACY

THE FIGHT FOR DEMOCRATIC VALUES THROUGH
THE EYES OF EUROPEAN CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS



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This publication was produced in Luxembourg for information purposes on the occasion of the exhibition Art in Democracy from the European Parliament's Contemporary art collection, with the aim of providing an educational reference about the background and artistic legacy of the artists whose works are displayed, and of preserving and promoting their contribution to Europe's cultural heritage.

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WHY ART IN DEMOCRACY?

What is democracy? Why has the European Union embraced democratic values? The European Parliament's Contemporary Art Collection includes a significant number of art pieces that may help address these questions, and let us have an insight into how democracy has been interpreted by visual artists from different countries of the continent.

The selected artworks can be defined as critical and personal visions of each one of the featured artists, who have taken clear positions in favour of defending democracy through their production. They contribute to reinforcing awareness of the need to stand up for democratic freedoms, pointing towards the duty to remain alert and participatory in processes as decisive as the European elections. In this context, they remind us that European citizens also have a role to play in defending democracy by voting in the upcoming European elections in June 2024.

In addition, the exhibition narrative aims to provide valuable perspectives on key aspects that any healthy democracy require, such as the respect of its rules of game and a necessary political engagement from society. Apart from other relevant issues that involve challenges and pose a test for our democratic values, like the relationship between citizens and institutions, the role of mass media in providing clear and reliable information, the limits of the States' power in the face of citizens' private lives and initiatives, or migratory and transboundary movements.

Some important trends in contemporary art cast a reflective and critical eye on the social and political realities of the modern world, often with a dose of irony, sarcasm, scepticism or bitterness. In this sense, they are strongly characterised by the intellectual, ethical and, in some cases, openly political commitment embraced by so many artists in the 20th and 21st century.

Art can often take a critical view that penetrates and transcends the straightforward appearance of our daily lives to reveal facets of it that often go unnoticed, highlight inconvenient truths and raise ethical and historical issues. This is art intended to warn and advise, lucidly comment and be thought provoking.

Art is a powerful tool for communicating and generating awareness about different problems, since it allows expression in ways that written or oral languages do not. Art has the ability to move and connect. It has the ability to awaken thoughts and ideas, and be the starting point for civic dialogue, for deeper conversations about what is relevant to the community, and for breaking through the polarization around some issues.¹

In the current panorama of the visual arts there are trends with names such as Artivism, Engaged Art, Community Art, Ecological Art, etc., which understand the function of art as a weapon of protest, as an expression of issues and problems of a political nature, therefore susceptible to be debated in democracy.

Art then becomes a means of communication and a political tool focused on change and the transformation of society: a language that transcends the academic and museum world to move on to other areas and reach a broader audience. Such was one of the ambitions that, under different strategies and objectives, encouraged the emergence of several of the artistic avant-gardes of the 20th century, such as Dadaism, Surrealism or later on Conceptual Art.

There have not been many artistic initiatives, articulated in collectives or movements, that have adopted the word "democracy" in their name. A case in which the term was used, incorporating it into the name of an artistic collective, occurred in 1974 with the formation of the

group "Artists for Democracy", which pursued: "a clear and emphatic aim: to express solidarity with international political struggles. The experimental artistic practices adopted by the group constituted not only new ways of making art, but also alternative methods for expressing political thought and manifesting political acts. (...) Artists for Democracy enacted solidarity as a creative political act".²

It should not be forgotten that the artworks that make up this exhibition, like many others featured in collections and exhibitions throughout Europe, have been born largely from the possibility that a democratic society offers to individuals of freely expressing their opinion and thoughts through diverse means. One of these communication channels is the artistic one, linked to the development of intelligence and critical thinking, as recognized by the European Parliament:

"The promotion of European cultural diversity and of the awareness of common roots is based on the freedom of artistic expression, the capability and competences of artists and cultural operators, the existence of flourishing and resilient cultural and creative sectors in the public and private domain and their ability to create, innovate and produce their works and distribute them to a large and diverse European audience".³

"Whereas Europe represents an immense richness of cultural, social, linguistic and religious diversity; whereas, in this context, the shared values that hold together our societies, such as freedom, social justice, equality and non-discrimination, democracy, human rights, the rule of law, tolerance and solidarity, are crucial for Europe's future; (...) Emphasizes the rich contribution of European artistic production to cultural diversity and the role it thus plays in spreading the values of the EU and exhorting European citizens to develop critical thinking (...)".⁴

1. EUROPEAN UNION. THE PROJECT OF EUROPEAN CONSTRUCTION. DEMOCRACY AND ITS RULES OF THE GAME

We begin this artistic journey around democracy with a set of works that materialize positive and exciting visions about the realization of the European project.

At the end of the 1980s, **Françoise Schein** produced a series of panels comparable to reliefs, the formal references of which can be found in the urban development plans of large modern cities or in maps of infrastructure and communication routes (metro and train lines, major roads, airways).

Her *Ideoglyphe Européen* (1988) consists of a labyrinthine pattern of criss-crossing routes and directions, superimposed on a metal surface that has been deliberately rusted; a network of winding roads among which twinkle tiny electric bulbs positioned where the EU's capitals would be on a map of the continent. The ensemble is crowned by a row of small clocks indicating the time zones, which, according to Schein's intention, should all be properly set as a sign of understanding and agreement among the countries: *"mettre des montres à l'heure = signe de l'entente, accord"*.⁵

In 1997, when the artwork was acquired and presented in the European Parliament, Schein defined this panel-relief as an *"abstract work that deals in fact with the theme of European construction. Describing the borders of a continent in motion and in full swing, this work was conceived two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Premonitory of an event that would shake Europe after the Second World War, I made this sculpture after having lived in New York for ten years, a long period of absence and estrangement that undoubtedly allowed me to understand, thanks to that regard from the outside, the cohesion that exists among all the countries of Europe, cohesion created by a single people: the Europeans"*.⁶

Schein also defined the *Ideoglyphe* as the first in a long series of large-format works that she had undertaken since 1989. Her international urban art project, developed in various metro stations in European capitals, also adopted a fundamental motive: the network, with the aim of expressing the close relationship between knowledge and democracy.⁷

Another emblematic object that deals with the key function of the European Parliament as the engine of parliamentary democracy on the continent, is *European Parliament* (1979). Its author, **John Vassar House**, designed an object reminiscent of a large compass, astrolabe or scientific navigation instrument, that symbolically represents a specific moment in the history of the European project, in 1979:

"The European Parliament piece commemorates the elections of 1979 and represents a moment when several European countries are about to join membership. The existing countries are part of the ring with their distinctive wedge shape to form a solid circle. New members are ready to join in as part of a centrifugal force".⁸

In addition, the morphology of the sculpture incorporated a significant reference to the division of powers within the European Community:

"The small laminated ring which revolves about its axis of 3 pins – which stand for the council, commission and judiciary – represents the mechanism of non legislative functions".⁹

These inspiring principles were translated into a fascinating rotating mechanism, an imaginary compass or watch which, set at a dynamic inclination on its axis, marks the movements of an action coordinated between the countries that made up the European Union in 1979 and those that were waiting to join shortly.

Having designed this sculpture as a *"visual commemoration of the immensely historical moment when the first universal suffrage takes place for the European Parliament"*, Vassar provided further clues about its meaning: *"The wedge-shaped elements of the ring are the 9 member countries, each sized according to its voting strength. Their external surfaces express the individuality of the countries, while the inner surface of the ring represents their fusion into a single unit: the European Parliament."*

Three counter-clockwise movements on the inner ring respectively back France – Germany, Benelux – Italy and Denmark – Great Britain – Ireland as a chronology of recent European cooperation. Greece is poised waiting to enter the circle. The base, symbolizing the electorate, is composed of a flow of various political currents upon which the entire Parliamentary structure rests. These currents crest as a kinetic force, giving impetus to the Parliament's activities".¹⁰

The chamber where the legislative power of the European Community resided was represented in *Hémicycle Strasbourg* (1987), which shows an aspect of the hemicycle in full session chaired by P. Daenkert in 1987, probably taken from a photograph of the period and pictorially interpreted by **John Goudie Lynch** with documentary accuracy and technical neatness.



Presentation of the painting *Hémicycle Strasbourg* (1987) in the presence of the President of the European Parliament, Piet Dankert, and the painter, John Goudie Lynch.

Near the other great hemicycle of the European Parliament, in Brussels, stands the monumental *Confluences* (1989), by the Belgian sculptor **Olivier Strebelle**, defying gravity as one of his technically most daring works. The artist erected a veritable steel tree, a strong cylindrical trunk that rises and branches out in a great number of tubes grouped in bunches that meet, spread out and sway in the Spaak Building's atrium. A free and organic structure that symbolises, as its title suggests, a sphere of confluences and meetings, of fraternity and good understanding that the European nations must seek to maintain in their exchanges and common enterprises.¹¹



OLIVIER STREBELLE (1927–2017)

Belgium

CONFLUENCES, 1989

Polished stainless steel; 36 m high
Donated by the artist in 1992



FRANÇOISE SCHEIN (*1953)

Belgium

IDEOGLYPHE EUROPÉEN, 1988

Rusted metal panel; 200 x 200 x 40 cm

Donated by Suzanne Delevoy in 1996



JOHN VASSAR HOUSE (1926–1982)

United States of America

PARLAMENTO EUROPEO 1979, 1979

Bronze on wooden pedestal; 95 x 165 cm

Donated to President Colombo from the Italian State in 1979



JOHN GOUDIE LYNCH (*1946)

The Netherlands

HÉMICYCLE STRASBOURG, 1987

Oil on panel; 96 x 194 cm

Donated by the artist

2. CIVIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Paul Henry Spaak's portrait by Fabian Edelstam, a poster of the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought (1993's edition), and Josef Antall's typewriter - witness to the intellectual and political activity of its owner -, they all refer to paradigmatic characters representative of the fight for freedom and democratic values in Europe: illustrious examples of how the commitment, tenacious work and leadership of certain political figures constitute essential elements for parliamentary democracy to be instituted and to prosper.

Democracy needs its heroes, not only the public and notorious, but also the anonymous ones, like the ordinary people starring in the photographic corpus of Paul Graham; people often captured in an apparently casual and spontaneous way, on the street or indoors. In the Art Collection's photograph, those same people are present, paradoxically, through their absence in a humble corner of the city of Belfast, occupied by a simple cement bench.

On the other hand, the gouache *Wähle!* (1979), - by Jörg Immendorff - a painter who understood art as a corrective to social and political grievances - is part of the time when he produced his most famous pictorial series, *Cafe Deutschland* (1977-1982).¹² This small work on paper - *Wähle!* - is a passionate exhortation to freely speak out and choose between various alternatives, thus pointing to active participation in matters that concern civic life.



POSTER OF THE SAKHAROV PRIZE FOR FREEDOM OF THOUGHT (1993)



FABIAN EDELSTAM (*1965)

Sweden

PORTRAIT OF PAUL-HENRI SPAAK, 2013

Mixed media on canvas; 140 x 110 cm

Donated by the artist in 2014



PAUL GRAHAM (*1956)

United Kingdom

UNTITLED, BELFAST (CONCRETE BENCH)

Photograph on aluminium; 75 x 100 cm

Purchased via the Anthony Reynolds Gallery (London) in 1993



JÖRG IMMENDORFF (1945–2007)

Germany

WÄHLE!, 1979

Gouache on paper; 28 x 21 cm

Purchased via the Galerie Rudolf Zwirner (Cologne) in 1983



JOSEF ANTALL'S TYPEWRITER

Hungary

European Parliament Art and Culture Collection

3. THE RELATIONSHIP OF CITIZENS WITH PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND JUSTICE

The relationship between citizens and institutions – both governmental and nongovernmental –, much too often burdened by distrust, is the fundamental theme that can be noticed in some works in the collection, such as **John Goudie Lynch's *Girokantoor* (1983)** and **Hannah Collins' *Power is Work, Work is Power* (1990)**.¹³

J. G. Lynch's painting shows us the window of a service office, which could belong to a bank, a ministry or a public agency. If we look closely, we will notice the reflection of a person in the glass – a woman carrying two bags or suitcases – and the ambiguous gesture, difficult to decipher, of two employees or officials, sheltered behind the glass and the sign – “Gesloten” – that warns that the establishment is already closed. An everyday situation that, painted and framed by Lynch, takes on a paradigmatic and critical dimension, emphasizing the denial of communication and assistance by the power (the institution or administration) towards the citizen who comes to make a request.

That distance, which seems insurmountable, is further accentuated in Hannah Collins' photographic diptych, *Power is Work, Work is Power* (1990), where the Queen's Counsel featured in the picture and defined by its symbol of political power, the wig, turns his back on the viewer and reveals himself as an impersonal and inaccessible figure.

In contrast to the two previous works, Galli's little drawing strikes us as a light and carefree dedication to the social security or pension office.



JOHN GOUDIE LYNCH (*1946)

The Netherlands

GIROKANTOOR, 1983

Oil on panel; 60 x 52 cm

Purchased from the artist in 1983



GALLI (*1944)

Germany

**AN DAS VERSORGUNGSAMT
(TO THE SOCIAL WELFARE OFFICE)**

Crayon on paper; 30 x 21 cm

Purchased via the Galerie Georg Nothelfer in 1983



HANNAH COLLINS (*1956)

United Kingdom

POWER IS WORK, WORK IS POWER, 1990

Gelatin Silver Print; (diptych) 120 x 190 cm each

Purchased from the artist in 1993

4. RISKS AND DANGERS FOR DEMOCRACY

Polarization of conflicts and disagreements between different communities, fear of the future and excessive surveillance and control of individuals, are themes and concerns reflected in a series of works that echo states of crisis and unease, spurring us to adopt a conscious stance vis-à-vis the realities they interpret.

Willie Doherty photographed an urban landscape, a desolate street in his native Derry shrouded in a luminous haze; the inhabitants, absent or locked up in their houses. Using an ellipsis, he captures a situation marked by hidden violence and tension, and labels it with the word *Endurance* - which denotes resistance, tenacity, integrity.¹⁴

Doherty thus resorts to a link between the word and the image, which had already been practiced in the 20th century by Dadaism, Surrealism and later on by Conceptual Art. He uses this semantic resource in reference to the historical, political and social conflict experienced in Northern Ireland, and alludes to the messages and graffiti written on the Derry walls by both sides facing each other.¹⁵

These are laconic and, at first glance, enigmatic messages, such as those written on the diptych: *Many have eyes but cannot see* (1992). On the left and right wings the words: "Blind spot" and "Vanishing point" perhaps allude to the dead, blind spots which surveillance, whether through cameras or patrols, does not reach.¹⁶

The eye that has the potential to see and inadvertently scrutinize certain areas of the territory and of social life, constitutes a disturbing iconographic element in the retro-illuminated photographic piece of the duo **TwoFourTwo - Believe in me** (2005), where the great eyelid of a human eye stands out behind a metal grid similar to the bars of a prison.

Drawing on a specific historical-social context, Doherty has created an image - *Endurance* - whose meaning, if we disregard its geographical and political background, could be generically extrapolated to any other places and situations where civil society maintains a supportive, silent resistance in the face of a threat. In addition, Doherty's work involves the will to keep alive the memory of the events that led to the conflict. From them, a warning can be drawn about the need to increase the civic and creative capacity of societies to peacefully solve problems, promote cooperation and avoid extreme, violent situations like the one depicted in **James Hanley's The Convert** (1992).¹⁷

When the State is transformed into a fearsome apparatus that does not serve the citizens but uses them and invades their privacy, then it takes on the monstrous form of a mythological Leviathan. This can be seen, emerging from the ocean, in the central panel of Andrey Daniel's Apocalyptic Triptych: *Trilogy: The Elusive Meaning of Cause and Effect: To Bruegel, The Mating Season of the Leviathans, The Death of Worker X* (2009).

Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) by means of an homage to the sixteenth century painter Pieter Brueghel the Elder, is likely referenced by Daniel. Specifically, he would be referring to one of Brueghel's masterpieces: *Dulle Griet* (ca. 1564) - Collection of the Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp -, in which the main character, Dulle Griet, is looking at the mouth of hell, personified as a leviathan face.¹⁸

In the same way that Brueghel's paintings could be seen in the 16th century as visual documents of popular culture, the characters in Daniel's triptych are ordinary people of the 21st century: tourists on the left panel, construction workers on the right; all of them suddenly suffering a cosmic upheaval that severely disrupts their lives.

In Bulgaria, Daniel was acknowledged as "an artist, a community leader, a colleague, a mentor, he established himself as one of the leading figures in art pushing Bulgarian painting forward at the close of the 20th and the turn of the 21st centuries". As one of the best connoisseurs of the painter's work has pointed out, Daniel claimed and believed that artists should synthesise meaning: "And if we do not learn to invent meaning, to synthesise meaning for ourselves and for others, for very large groups of people, then this existence will rather be some sort of vegetating".¹⁹

Other dangers and disasters - terrorism, war, vandalism, etc. - which also threaten democracy and freedom, have been humorously depicted by **Flo Kasearu** in the series of drawings *Fears of a Museum Director* (2014). These seemingly comical scenes take on a deeper significance: they express the fear of an uncertain future through an approach typical of journalistic cartoons, by displaying a repertoire of extreme and catastrophic situations in which any public or private institution could be involved.

The risk of non-critical thinking and alienation finds an accurate allegorical representation in the oil on wood by **Yannis Gaitis: The Parade** (1983). Here, the principles of overcrowding, indoctrination and homogenisation have been portrayed, showing the commonality of man transformed into a linear and alienated flock of identical human beings standing in overlapping rows. Gaitis lends a touch of humour to this rigid crowd of individuals, enabling us to more easily digest this representation of a social system that is overwhelmingly uniform.

Eventually, a feeling of uncertainty is prompted by **Dan Wolgers' End of the public road** (1995), where the viewer can recognize itself in the driver of the vehicle reflected in the metallic blue signage placed at the edge of the road. If we take the public road as a metaphorical image of civilization and the rule of law, we can then consider this photo as an ambiguous warning about what can be glimpsed beyond the scope where the principle of legal certainty rules.



WILLIE DOHERTY (*1959)

United Kingdom

ENDURING, DERRY, 1992

Black and white photograph on aluminium, 125 x 190 cm

Purchased via Matt's Gallery (London) in 1993



DAN WOLGERS (*1955)

Sweden

HÄR SLUTAR ALLMÄN VÄG (SERIES)

END OF PUBLIC ROAD III, 1995

Cibachrome, edition 1/3; 162 x 196 cm

Purchased from Patrik Förberg



WILLIE DOHERTY (*1959)

United Kingdom

MANY HAVE EYES BUT CANNOT SEE, 1992

Type C Photographs with text (diptych) (left: Vanishing point, right: Blind spot); 122 x 184 cm (each)

Labelled (on the reverse). Purchased via the Oliver Dowling Gallery (Dublin) in 1992



ANDREY DANIEL (1952–2019)

Bulgaria

TRILOGY: THE ELUSIVE MEANING OF CAUSE AND EFFECT, 2009

TO BRUEGEL; THE MATING SEASON OF THE LEVIATHANS; THE DEATH OF THE WORKER X

Oil on canvas; 170 x 160 cm each (triptych)

Initialed and dated (lower left for the left and centre panels, lower right for the right panel)

Purchased from the artist in 2011



FLO KASEARU
Estonia
FEARS OF A MUSEUM DIRECTOR (2014)
Pencil, paper
65 × 50 cm (each)



JAMES HANLEY

Ireland

THE CONVERT, 1992

Oil on board, 175 x 121 cm

Dated and titled (on the reverse)

Purchased from the artist in 1993



TWO/FOUR/TWO

(ART GROUP CREATED IN 1996)

COSTAS MANTZALOS (*1963) & CONSTANTINOS KOUNNIS (*1973)

Cyprus

BELIEVE IN ME, 2005

Photo, perspex, metal, light; 62 x 60 cm

Purchased from the artists in 2007



YANNIS GAITIS (1923–1984)

Greece

THE PARADE, 1983

Oil on wood; 160 x 115 cm

Signed (lower left)

Purchased from the artist in 1983

5. MASS MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

The relationship between power, the media and the public is an issue that beats strongly in the works of Olaf Metzel and Antoni Clavé. Metzel's piece, with a more explicit and provocative tone, operating the conversion of press information into a sort of gold plated idol.

The power to inform – but also to distort – the public's perception and opinion of everyday events is a recurring theme in the art of **Olaf Metzel**. The large panel *Il Messagero, mercoledì 12. Ottobre 1988* (1989), consists of metal matrices for printing the eponymous Italian newspaper of the titled date. The central issues engraved in the matrices – kidnappings, terror, tragedies – have been rendered almost indistinguishable to today's distanced onlookers by the intricate cracked surface of this relief aluminium work.

Antoni Clavé's painting conveys an image about the value of press news and its diffusion throughout the urban space. *New York II* (1989) alludes to the dissemination of culture, its constant cycle of use, rapid wear and replacement. Pop poetics and the use of collage - newspaper and magazine imagery directly applied onto the surface - are in tune with the artistic production of the American Robert Rauschenberg in the sixties: images interwoven in a palimpsest-like arrangement and punctuated by gestural strokes of luminous pigment.

Reference to the news, embodied in newspapers by means of text and photographs, also underpins the concept of *Wall* (2008), in which the multimedia artist **Anna Baumgart** stages a distressing and tragic real-life situation, drawn from a specific point in European history.

Etched in capital letters on the leg of one of the figures is the inscription *Reuters Forum* – news agency – to indicate the iconographic origin of the group of sculptures. Indeed, the visual referent is a press photo immortalising a group of Berliners fleeing after being evacuated from their homes in August 1961. The day of the photograph, the wall that bisected the city was becoming ever harder to cross and turning into that deadly barrier which would symbolise the deep ideological divide between the Soviet bloc and the West for the three decades to come. Until 1989, when the wall was torn down, a historic moment captured in some of the photos that make up **Frank Thiel's** series *Berlin* (1990)

Baumgart references the photojournalistic origin of her sculptures by splitting each person into two clear halves: grey gradations on the front and solid white sections at the back. This distinction reflects the two-dimensional origins of the group and its transposition from a photograph to a three-dimensional space.

Although the sculpture is far more abstract than the original photo and does not show the individuals' faces in detail, Baumgart lends the work remarkable realism in recreating the objects they are carrying, including the texture of the boxes and bags. The feeling of urgency and fear, betrayed by the positions and gestures of the Berlin citizens in the photo, was softened in the resin figures, a material widely used by seminal contemporary figurative sculpture names, such as Juan Muñoz or Keith Edmier.



OLAF METZEL (*1952)

Germany

IL MESSAGERO, MERCOLEDÌ 12. OTTOBRE 1988, 1989

Matrix of newspaper on aluminium; 237 x 310 x 27 cm

Purchased via the Galerie Fahnenmann (Berlin) in 1990



ANTONI CLAVÉ (1913–2005)

Spain

NEW YORK II, 1989

Mixed media; 162 x 130 cm

Signed and dated (lower right)

Purchased from the artist in 1991



ANNA BAUMGART (*1966)

Poland

WALL, 2008 (5 SCULPTURE ENSEMBLE)

Acrylic resin and acrylic paint; 123 cm (height of each figure)

Purchased via the Fundacja Lokal Sztuki (Warsaw) in 2009



FRANK THIEL (*1966)

Germany

**MAUERABRISS IN DER HÖHE DES ALFRED DÖBLIN-PLATZES
IN BERLIN-KREUTZBERG**

Series Berlin (6 Photographs), 1990

Gelatin silver print, 19.50 x 58.50 cm

Long-term loan from the German Parliament's Art Collection



FRANK THIEL (*1966)

Germany

BRANDENBURGER TOR IN BERLIN, NOVEMBER 1989

Series Berlin (6 Photographs), 1990

Gelatin silver print, 19.50 x 58.50 cm

Long-term loan from the German Parliament's Art Collection



FRANK THIEL (*1966)

Germany

MAUER AN DER SCHILLING-BRÜCKE IN BERLIN-KREUTZBERG, JUNE 1990

Series Berlin (6 Photographs), 1990

Gelatin silver print, 19.50 x 58.50 cm

Long-term loan from the German Parliament's Art Collection



FRANK THIEL (*1966)

Germany

MAUER IN BERLIN-KREUTZBERG, DEZEMBER 1989

Series Berlin (6 Photographs), 1990

Gelatin silver print, 19.50 x 58.50 cm

Long-term loan from the German Parliament's Art Collection



FRANK THIEL (*1966)

Germany

MAUER AM MARTIN GROPIUS-BAU IN BERLIN-KREUTZBERG, JUNI 1990

Series Berlin (6 Photographs), 1990

Gelatin silver print, 19.50 x 58.50 cm

Long-term loan from the German Parliament's Art Collection



FRANK THIEL (*1966)

Germany

BERLIN-SPANDAU, JULI 1990

Series Berlin (6 Photographs), 1990

Gelatin silver print, 19.50 x 58.50 cm

Long-term loan from the German Parliament's Art Collection

6. DEMOCRACY AND URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS

A coherent group of works by Bulgarian artists addresses, in a critical and exemplary manner, various aspects of the influence that Bulgaria's incorporation into the European Union had on people's lives.

Motif I (State Machine), by Nadezhda Oleg Lyahova, is part of the project *Globally and on a Long-term Basis the Situation is Positive (2007-2009)*, that comprises a series of short videos shot on the streets of Sofia, as well as a series of digital prints on canvas ("motifs") featuring static images from the said videos.

This digital print refers to the excesses of urban development and government intervention in the planning of large cities. The rows of excavating machines, lined up and arranged in horizontal rows like an army of aliens in a primitive video game, symbolize the large-scale construction fever that broke out in Bulgaria after the country's integration into the European Union. As Lyahova herself has commented:

"As a result of its EU accession on January 1, 2007, Bulgaria was granted a full member status. Hence the opportunity to participate in all "special", "regional", "innovative", "cross-border", "multicultural" projects aimed at the implementation of "EU norms" and also allowing us to take advantage of a "wide range of opportunities" offered by the EU. (...)

*There came entrepreneurial investors, bringing equipment and people of all sorts. Intensive construction work started. Construction equipment roared in the neighbourhood. Concrete and iron replaced the green grass. In the midst of thunder, mud and clouds of dust enthusiastic people and machines do their daily bit to build our European future".*²⁰

The idealistic counterpoint to the critical and skeptical vision of Lyahova would find an idyllic representation in the poster designed by the Polish illustrator and painter **Rafał Olbiński**, where a female personification of Europe, in harmony with pictorial models of the Italian Renaissance, sleeps peacefully before a bucolic landscape, while emblematic buildings of Poland sprout from her dreams.

A light vision of pure enjoyment in urban spaces is provided by **Vasilena Gankovska's** painting, where youth people carelessly gather in the meadow of Vienna's Burggarten Park - *An Afternoon at Burggarten #2 (2007)* -.

If the work of Oleg Lyahova was about a new city in the process of construction, the digital photography of the duo **Missirkov & Bogdanov - Weekend 2126. The Valchevs (2008)** -, instead looks back at the institutional architecture of the communist regime; namely the Memorial House of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Buzludzha (1981), currently seen as an extraordinary monumental relic that still maintains a futuristic, science-fiction look.

The building, in the shape of a UFO (a sort of Brutalist, retro-futurist, flying saucer), stands out in the background of an imaginary landscape, where the members of a family dressed in folkloric costumes move around.

As the critics have pointed out:

"In Weekend 2126 - The Valchevs (2008), the Valchev family is depicted as being on a sunny Sunday outing, languidly strolling the slopes of Mount Buzludzha. Some family members are even in the act of idly composing some musical score, just after having landed their ship on top of the mountain in an otherwise deserted landscape. This scene, though referencing a reimagined old and a half-remembered new, is set in the future, that much is clear. This, despite the quiriness of their ethno-medieval-esque dresses, dashiki-like shirts and handmade musical instruments that are reminiscent of some long-forgotten, yet pop-cultured, folklore.

*Missirkov/Bogdanov's tableau offers a possible version of how Buzludzha might be viewed and valued several generations later".*²¹



RAFAŁ OLBIŃSKI (B. 1945)

Poland

LA POLOGNE DANS L'U.E.

Designed on the occasion of 'membership'

64 x 80 cm



NADEZHDA OLEG LYAHOVA (*1960)

Bulgaria

MOTIF I (STATE MACHINE); EDITION 1/4

Digital print on paper; 59 x 64 cm

Inscribed "GLOBALLY AND ON A LONG-TERM BASIS THE SITUATION IS POSITIVE"

Purchased from the artist in 2011



VASILENA GANKOVSKA

Bulgaria

AN AFTERNOON AT BURGGARTEN #2

SERIES "A BURGGARTEN AFTERNOON", 2007

Oil paints, marker on canvas



BORIS MISSIRKOV (*1971) & GEORGI BOGDANOV (*1971)

Bulgaria

VALCHEVS FAMILY, BUZLUDZHA PEAK

(FROM THE "WEEKEND 2126" SERIES; EDITION OF 3 + 1)

Digital Pigment Print; 81 x 118 cm

Purchased from the artists in 2011

7. DEMOCRATIZATION OF ART

The incardination of art in daily life, in major themes and social concerns of the present moment, such as the relationship between culture and the market, migratory movements or the family, is a feature that manifests with particular emphasis in the following selected works.

Currently, the political-social activation of art finds one of its most effective, controversial and recognizable global expressions in graffiti. *Knock, Knock Knocking On Heaven's Door (2007)*, by **Jaan Elken**, is the product of a vigorous exercise combining the technical resources of tachisme and graffiti. After a hyperrealist period, Elken let himself be enticed by this alternative street cultural phenomenon that he could often see when he lived in the ghetto area of Lasnamäe, when he had to pass through several storeys of interiors filled with urban symbols before reaching his studio.

Joep van Lieshout's *Medicine cabinet (1992)* is a metallic box of a neutral gray color and an ordinary appearance – a moulded reproduction of an industrial unit –; an example of a discreet and conceptual artistic object, where the artist's authorship and personality are apparently absent. However, it is revealed to us as a contradictory piece, since when opening the door of the box, we discover the artist's signature, scribbled large, on the bottom of the interior.

The artist founded Atelier Van Lieshout in 1995, a studio that follows a methodology toward undermining the myth of the artistic genius. In order to produce useful and imaginative art, endowed with a certain sense of humour and at the service of society, Van Lieshout has established a multidisciplinary practice that produces works on the borders between art, design, and architecture, investigating the thin line between manufacturing art and mass-producing functional objects.

Food production and consumption, transformed by the related industry and marketing into standardised products and advertising icons, is a central motif in **Marko Blažo's** *Homage to Andy Warhol*, explicitly referencing the American artist's 1962 series of 32 Campbell soup cans, considered today to be a seminal pop art landmark. In *Warhol 1 (2007)*, Blažo has enveloped the soup tin in a Greco-Roman portico, an all-encompassing outer shell redolent of Roman antiquity and classical art, which suggests a sort of coupling between classical culture and mass culture.

Migratory movements, and their profound impact on families and societies, is one of the central topics in the career of the Maltese artist **Ruth Bianco**, with projects such as *Connecting geographies* or *Tidal dialogues and transit zones*, which develop a research-led art practice interrogating issues of territory and transboundary movements.

The polyptych *Lines of migration (2020-2021)* is unequivocally linked to the art contestataire or street art, given the expressive use of collage as well as the communicative effectiveness of the symbols and laconic written messages it puts into play. As the artist herself has pointed out, the artisanal and tactile quality of the piece plays a vital role in her concept, particularly since this work was produced during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the world had to resort to remote and socially distanced forms of contact.

Family bonds are seen from an unusual angle in **Edith Karlson's *Family (2019)***. Karlson often works with monstrous or animal characters, whether they come from extinct fauna or from medieval beast iconography that have later on been echoed in the world of fantastic literature and cinema. Karlson's sculptures have sometimes been described as fables, especially when her animals or creatures are given human characteristics and behaviours in order to comment on contemporary society with a critical eye.



RUTH BIANCO

Malta

LINES OF MIGRATION, 2020-21

Collage diptych - montage on handmade paper

Measurement of the total composition including the frame is 160 × 250 cm



JAAN ELKEN (*1954)

Estonia

KNOCK, KNOCK KNOCKING ON HEAVEN'S DOOR, 2007

Acrylic on canvas; 160 x 200 cm

Signed and dated (lower right), titled (centre top)

Purchased from the artist in 2007



JOEP VAN LIESHOUT

Netherlands

MEDICINE CABINET, 1992

Molded Resin, 50 x 50 x 10 cm

Signed (inside door)

Purchased via the Galerie Fons Welters
(Amsterdam) in 1992



MARKO BLAŽ

Slovakia

WARHOL 1, 2007

Mixed media on canvas,
100 x 80 cm

Purchased from the artist in 2010



EDITH KARLSON

Estonia

FAMILY, 2019

Concrete, metal, mixed media

Dimensions variable, height approximately 120 cm

NOTES

1. "The ability to name and/or rename a problem is one of the most effective accomplishments of an artwork, and artworks can help identify problems and suggest solutions on a very broad level". Lvova, M.: *Art and Democracy: Citizens' Creative Energy as a Force for Social Change*. Dayton: Kettering Foundation, 2017
2. As scholars have commented: "We take Artists for Democracy (AFD) as a starting point to explore the entanglement of art in the UK with transnational solidarities shaped by migration and political mobilisation. The histories of AFD reveal festival as a form and practice encompassing banner-making and posters, artworks, photographs, films, machines and sounds, participation, performances, lectures, and slide shows, by artists of diverse origins to collectively address political conjunctures (...)". *Precarious Solidarities: Artists for Democracy (1974-77)*, February 2023. Event programme including talks by Cecilia Vicuña: "To Organize Dreaming" or "To Organize Dreaming was the dream"; Wing Chan and David Morris: "Precarious Solidarities"; and Hannah Healey: "Artists for Democracy and experimental art as solitary practice", among others. Symposium Online via zoom organised by Afterall Research Centre, University of the Arts London.
3. European Parliament legislative resolution of 28 March 2019 on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Creative Europe programme (2021 to 2027) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1295/2013 (COM(2018)0366 – C8-0237/2018 – 2018/0190(COD))
4. European Parliament resolution of 19 January 2016 on the role of intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity and education in promoting EU fundamental values (2015/2139(INI))
5. (European Parliament Art Collection Archive)
6. *ibid.*
7. *ibid.*
8. Documentation delivered by the artist's family (European Parliament Art Collection Archive)
9. *ibid.*
10. *ibid.*
11. WINTLE, Michael, "Europe on Parade", in SPIERING, Menno y WINTLE, Michael (Ed.): *Ideas of Europe since 1914: The legacy of the First World War*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 121-124.
12. Between 1977 and 1982, Immendorff created a series of paintings, drawings, and prints titled *Café Deutschland*, in which the opposing ideologies of East and West Germany are represented on a metaphorical stage. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80069>
13. Mathews, D.: *The Ecology of Democracy*. United States of America: Kettering Foundation Press, 2014.
14. "Respect, retrait, ellipse: Willie Doherty est la représentation oblique du conflit irlandais. (...) De l'oeuvre de Willie Doherty - photographies, photomontages et vidéos - est difficile de comprendre les enjeux, tant plastiques que politiques, si l'on ne rappelle pas, avec Declan MacGonagle, le sens de l'expression « longue guerre » et la définition des murals de Derry : « longue guerre » fut utilisé par le mouvement républicain irlandais pour définir le processus global dans lequel ses membres se trouvent impliqués depuis les années soixante-six, mais, comme le souligne Declan MacGonagle, l'expression se réfère également à une guerre bien plus longue - inachevable ? - menée pendant des siècles entre Anglais et Irlandais ». Dominique Baqué : *Pour un nouvel art politique. De l'art contemporain au documentaire*, Flammarion - Champs arts, 2009, pp. 189-193.
15. « Quant aux murals qui scandent les murs de Derry, et auxquels pour une part Doherty emprunte son lexique plastique, ils représentent, doublement et sur un modèle paradoxal, le langage revolté des dépossédés, des dominés, et le langage de ceux qui detiennent pouvoir et privilèges. (...) » *ibid.*
16. « Doherty a articulé l'ensemble de son oeuvre autour du conflit et de ses modalités de représentation (...) Longtemps, les productions de Doherty se présenterent sous la forme de photo-textes : des photographies, noir et blanc pour la plupart, de grand format, évoquant soit des paysages apparemment tranquilles, soit des espaces urbains soumis à la propagande, à la surveillance et au contrôle militaire, que venait barrer un texte laconique, aphoristique parfois - inscription du concept et de la revendication au coeur de la représentation. » *ibid.*
17. Alors que les autorités s'empressent aujourd'hui d'enlever, d'effacer tout signe de conflit, la photographie de Doherty s'applique au contraire à maintenir vivant le souvenir de ce qui déchira le pays, à exiger un devoir de mémoire ». *ibid.*
18. <https://museummayervandenbergh.be/en/zoektocht-naar-bruegel>
For further analysis, see: Bernadette Van Haute: "Dulle Griet' in seventeenth century Flemish painting: a risible image of popular peasant culture", *Acta Academica 2011 43(2): 1-40*. Unisa Institutional Repository (UnisaIR), University of South Africa.
19. Stefan Dzhambazov talking about Andrey Daniel, referring to a conversation to be published on the website vpreki.com. See: <https://nha.bg/en/page/exhibition-andrey-daniel---the-last-7-years-at-academia-gallery>
20. https://openartfiles.bg/en/files/download/1210/181207-183127_NOlyahovaPDF_web.pdf
21. Marie Bromander & Sebastian Rypson: "Monumental Negligence – or, how Bulgarian artists fight against monumental amnesia", 2019. <https://independent.academia.edu/MarieBromander>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

EXHIBITIONS

Structures de domination et de démocratie, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2018

Poéticas de la democracia. Imágenes y contra-imágenes de la Transición. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2018-2020.

Artists for Democracy (exhibition and archival display exploring the 1970s art and activism of the collective organisation "Artists for Democracy"). Presented by England & Co at the Horse Hospital, London, 2023.

BOOKS

Michael Wintle: "Europe on Parade" in SPIERING, Menno & WINTLE, Michael (Ed.): *Ideas of Europe since 1914: The legacy of the First World War*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. (EN)

Korza, P., Schaffer, B., & Assaf, A.: *Civic dialogue, arts & culture: findings from Animating Democracy*. Washington, DC. : Americans for the Arts, 2005 (EN)

Politik & Kunst - Kunst & Politik; Künstler und ihre Werke in den Bauten des Deutschen Bundestages in Berlin / Politics and Art - Art and Politics. Artists and Their Works in the Buildings of the German Parliament. Edited by order of the German Bundestag, by Dr. Andreas Kaernbach and Roger Sonnewald. Edition J.J. Heckenhauer, Berlin, 2005. (DE)

Dominique Baqué: *Pour un nouvel art politique. De l'art contemporain au documentaire*, Flammarion - Champs arts, 2009 (FR)

Joëlle Zask: *Art et démocratie. Les peuples de l'art*. Collection: Intervention philosophique. Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 2014 (FR)

Iván López Munuera: *Los encuentros de Pamplona (1972) como laboratorio de la democracia* (tesis doctoral). Universidad Complutense, Madrid, 2016 (ES)

F. de Meredieu: *Histoire matérielle et immatérielle de l'art moderne et contemporain*, Larousse, 2017. (FR)

Latorre, Guisela: *Democracy on the Wall. Street Art of the Post-Dictatorship Era in Chile*, 2019 (EN)
<https://ohiostatepress.org/books/titles/9780814214022.html>

Bill Posters: *The Street Art Manual*, Laurence King Publishing, 2020 (EN)

ARTICLES

Robert, P. : « Les deux temps des arts visuels en démocratie: l'humanisme démocratique de l'art moderne et la démocratie praticable de l'art contemporain ». *Nouveaux Cahiers du socialisme*, 2016, (15), 67-76 (FR)

Puello, L. (2020). « Art and democracy. Exploring new ways to work creatively with citizens ». *Palabra*, 20(1), 64-74. (EN)
<https://doi.org/10.32997/2346-2884-vol.20-num.1-2020-3225>

WEBSITES

<https://art-collection.europarl.europa.eu/en/>

<https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-42-spring-2018/opinion-john-paul-stonard-art-democracy>

<https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-liverpool/display/democracies>

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/community-art>

ARTISTS FEATURED IN THE EXHIBITION:

<https://www.francoiseschein.com/>

<https://www.goudielynch.fr/>

<http://hannahcollins.net/>

<https://www.twofourtwo.com/>

<https://www.jameshanley.net/>

<http://www.danwolgers.com/>

<https://www.paulgrahamarchive.com/>

<https://imma.ie/artists/willie-doherty/>

<http://www.flokasearu.eu/>

<https://www.frieze.com/article/olaf-metzel>

<https://www.antoni-clave.org/biographie/>

<https://www.missirkovbogdanov.com/>

<http://www.jaanelken.com/>

<https://www.ateliervanlieshout.com/>

<http://www.ruthbianco.com/Biodata.html>

<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/estonia-2024-venice-biennale-edith-karlson-1234649323/>



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