

Prologue: L'Internationale The Internationale Team
Zdenka Badovinac, Bart De Baere, Charles Esche, Bartomeu Mari,
Georg Schöllhammer, and all our museum colleagues.

In the early years of the 21st century, Europe seems uncertainly placed between a deep sense of its own historical importance and anxiety about where it may go in the future. The European project, which for many of our institutions was a guiding principle, has run aground on the rocks of neo-liberalism and an economic priority that forgot about society's political and cultural dimensions. The national project, on which the foundations of our museums (along with most of Europe's other cultural institutions) were based, retains little of its 19th century ambitions to progressive, democratic thinking. As a result, cultural Europe has to chart a new course for collaboration and for its relations with the rest of the globe. This course has to take account of Europe's murderous history both inside and outside its borders, as well as the aggressiveness with which Eurocentric solutions are still imposed on parts of other continents. At the same time, the construction of democratic ideals, the claims to human equality and many global liberation struggles have been inspired by popular, academic and cultural discourses developed in and around Europe, especially when it was in dialogue with the rest of the world.

It is to try and build on these latter qualities, in the form of artistic and discursive innovations around artists' works and collections of European art heritage, that a group of middle-sized European museums formed themselves into a fledging transnational cultural institution willing to rethink our shared European heritage. Internationale—consisting of Moderna galerija Ljubljana, MACBA Barcelona, Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, M HKA Antwerp, and Július Koller Society Bratislava/Vienna—seeks to work on terms that respect the relation between artistic voices and localities while searching for a common understanding of art's potential in the world. At this point in time, we cannot look to political or economic leadership to shape our goals, though we will need the active support of both if we are to build an emancipated vision of what it is to be a European cultural citizen. Instead, we feel the need to articulate our own agenda and to do so through

the means at our disposal: common exhibitions, publications, seminars and the sharing of our collections. Through coming together, we can discover more about our individual strengths and weaknesses, we can exchange information and experiences that can enrich our activities in the public domain, and we can cease the pointless competition for cultural capital that reduces art institutions to tools of economic development. We also want to offer an alternative to the “bigger is better” or franchise model of museums based in core northern European capitals, with their apparent desire to deliver a centralized narrative covering European and world art over the last fifty to sixty years. We would claim that the narrative of the last years is still a contested one, and it is our ambition to offer different interpretations from the mainstream as well as to understand how artistic practices are contextual and located. These cannot be simply displaced as objects to construct a single institutional vision of the significance of modern, post-modern and contemporary art today. Neither can they be marginalized as of only local concern when set against the art produced in the urban powerhouses of the continent. If we are to build a genuine vision of a European culture in just dialogue with the world, then constructing the conditions to respect locality while striving for the richest transnational dialogue are an absolute *imperative*.

Our long-term project bears the name of the song “L’Internationale” that proclaims internationalism as a kind of weapon in the struggle for equitable and more democratic societies. In choosing the name and tradition of that particular song we wanted to emphasize a distinction from the modernist understanding of a homogenized, cosmopolitan life or the more recent ideal of a globally networked individual free from a commitment to a particular community or place. Instead, we have decided for the tradition of internationalism represented by the older struggles of workers’ unions and intellectuals for international solidarity and fellowship. Their goals were directed at concrete changes beyond the nation-state towards a shared sense of citizenship in which all the dimensions from the personal to the local, regional, international and planetary are taken into consideration.

Parallel Histories/Affective Museums/ Spirits of Internationalism

The first project that the Internationale group has undertaken is to unite our collections virtually and draw on the total inheritance that we represent to suggest new ways of understanding the period 1957–1986, or the high point of the Cold War between the US and the USSR. The period is marked on the one side by the Hungarian uprising at the end of 1956 and the subsequent invasion by the Red Army that effectively registered the end of any potential for political reform in post-war East Central Europe. At the other end, 1986 represents the year of the financial “Big Bang” that reduced the effective power of political parties within Western Europe to one of economic management. In between these dates, a vision for a post-Holocaust, post-ethnically divided Europe was slowly constructed on both sides of the ideological divide. This Europe of the imagination was built not least by artists and academics that played a significant role in speculating on a new kind of continental common space that would keep the peace and emphasize cultural affinities. Even at the height of the East-West divide there was still some limited cultural exchange, both official and unofficial, to which a number of works in the exhibitions bear witness. The artistic efforts to depict and help construct a peaceful, open Europe out of the shattered imperial ambitions of the Second World War were shared and understood as the real responsibility of cultural actors who could offer images and ideas to counter the dangers of nationalism and ethnic hatreds. At the same time, most of these artists were necessarily active at the most local of levels, in their own cities and towns, and were working with the means at their disposal. For some this meant almost underground activities, out of sight of the cultural authorities, for others it meant particular attention to their national or regional history, often using their native languages in order to communicate with their immediate environment. These relevant tactics were, unsurprisingly, less noticed by the international art world both then and still today. With its English language priority and limited patience for inspirations or issues not instantly translatable for a non-local public, the art historical narrative of the years 1957–86 has tended to focus on New York, especially SoHo, and a limited number of European

centers that were in close contact with the American hub. The ambition of our three major exhibitions, as well as the archival presentations of Július Koller and KwieKulik, has been to recognize parallel histories, as the first title named them. These histories are in no way replacements for the dominant story but are ways of understanding the latter's weaknesses and biases and thus ceasing to put our faith in a single view of recent cultural developments. Each of the three exhibitions in MACBA, Moderna galerija and M KHA/Van Abbemuseum told its own story, one shaped by the host institution's intimate knowledge of its public, environment and own historical needs. MACBA wanted an extended presentation of the collection of Moderna galerija because it felt artists from East and Central Europe needed an introduction for the Catalan public. Moderna galerija chose for another kind of exhibition, that wove the collections of MACBA and M KHA together as a way of introducing different museum models as a way to introduce the permanent displays of their rich contemporary art collection in their new museum building in Metelkova, Ljubljana. Finally, Van Abbemuseum and M KHA wanted to exchange their collections with important supplements from MACBA and Moderna galerija to tell local histories of two neighboring countries with very different cultural and museum policies in the period under discussion.

This publication brings all the diversity of the first Internationale project between two covers, allowing readers the chance to discover the arguments for our selections and the choice of projects, as well as to find out more about particular artistic developments during the period. Alongside extensive visual and textual documentation of the three exhibitions the book develops four main sections, in which methodological concerns, historiographic aspirations, selected case studies, as well as further thoughts on internationalism in the arts are laid out. As this project draws to a close, Internationale is firing itself up for further and deeper collaborations in the future.