

THE LONG 1980s

CONSTELLATIONS OF ART, POLITICS AND IDENTITIES

An Introduction

Friends, citizens, subjects, travellers: we welcome you to our book. With the title *The Long 1980s: Constellations of Art, Politics and Identities*, we would like to offer you a multitude of perspectives and histories from, and on, the period of the eighties.

The core question: why the eighties? It is primarily because in analyzing the eighties, we identify many of the genealogies of our present moment. We look retrospectively here to a period of profound change in the world. A period that is still fresh within the living memory of many people, and that has had a lasting influence on our civil society, culture, politics, ecology and economics. If we consider just a few of the central events and narratives of that period — we might take, for example, the redrafting of the socio-economic rulebook defined by the neoliberal ideology of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, the end of the Cold War following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the beginnings of the institutionalization of multiculturalism, not to mention the invention of the World Wide Web — we identify the catalysts of seismic shifts on a global scale. These are but a few of the better-known manifestations, amongst many others that took place at a more local or regional level, that still determine many of the practices, counter-practices and ideological partialities of today. Many of the facets that comprise the crisis of the Western world order that we are currently experiencing can be directly traced to things that occurred in the eighties. For this reason, we decided to make a book about it.

What else was happening as these paradigmatic shifts were taking place? We zoom further into the territories of Europe, the broad geo-political focus within which this book situates itself, and we see seismic changes during this period. To the south, dictatorships in Portugal and Spain transitioned to capitalist democracies, resulting in a consensus-based politics that was often blind to the recent past. In Turkey, the decade began with a military coup and the subsequent reformulation of the constitution, which would have a profound effect on all aspects of governance and everyday life. In former Yugoslavia, the death of Tito and the demise of socialism precipitated the nation's eventual disintegration into war, genocide, and the emergence of new geo-political frontiers. To the west, the formation and rapid proliferation of neoliberalism would have a profound effect on how governments and their publics came to

view one another, heightened by the situation of deep economic recession. Within and against these contexts the voices, bodies, and ideas of new subjectivities emerged. Subjectivities that were articulating their position through the constituent identities of gender, sexuality, and race. The appearance of feminist, post-dictatorship, postcolonial and queer politics in the eighties, for example, and their manifestations within the spheres of art and culture bear testament to many of the constellations — of art, politics, and identities — that we describe as the sub-title of the book.

As you will get to see, it is, in fact, many of these latent or counter-narratives that we felt were significant to foreground, understanding that historical consciousness varies greatly across time and space. Over half the contents of this book is given over to case studies — 70 in total — that as a collective body of case studies might be seen to comprise an atlas of alternative practices, sitting in parallel to the dominant arc of history, whether challenging, mirroring, or deflecting it. It has been important to see that alternatives existed, particularly in that era when Thatcher resolutely told those forced to listen in the Western and Anglo spheres, not only that there wasn't an alternative, but that society didn't even exist at all. Yet the reality was that both alternatives and societies did exist, and still do in fact, bringing us to the heart of the many struggles and contradictions that define the early part of the twenty-first century. The supposedly definitive worldview that we remember has been unravelling. This book is about many of those that either did not want to accept it or saw it coming, and who used the situation to create spaces of solidarity, imagination, and invention. The eighties was a long decade, so much so that we decided to define it as being more like 20 years — roughly speaking from 1975 to 1995 — in recognition of the fact that a definitive decade is too blunt a method for defining the many faces of a complicated and pivotal era. It has helped us in our attempt to form a more complex portrait of this long decade.

The case studies presented comprise a collection of stories, facsimiles, and images from various spheres of creativity, such as arts, activism, or social movements — and they often have a local or national character. These inspiring, ground-breaking stories have often never been translated in any other language or are little known outside the frame of contemporary art history or beyond national borders. How to

produce new narratives by weaving these stories together, was the question we faced when structuring the book. We have organized the case studies in four units, larger chapters whose titles are the result of numerous editorial musings and internal debates about ethics and humour, and draw aspirations from various cultural references and from specific case studies mentioned in the publication. Within each of them we identified keywords that relate to the material presented, and from those we arranged two subchapters. The first chapter ‘No Alternative?’ appropriates Margaret Thatcher’s infamous maxim and explores the numerous ways cultural practitioners were offering alternative spaces and formats to the emergent neoliberal order. This section is divided into the sub-sections ‘Autonomous Zones’ and ‘Broadcast Yourself’. The second chapter, ‘Know Your Rights’, looks at the cultural and activist practices that were responding to the wave of forms of cultural and political oppression in the eighties. As such, it is composed of the sub-chapters ‘Ecologies and Anti-Militarism’ and ‘Civil Liberties’. The third chapter, ‘Processes of Identification’, is framed around the sections ‘Hybridity and Anti-Imperialism’ and ‘Bodies Put Up a Fight’, looking at the manifold ways subjectivities and identities were articulating themselves through culture and at the intersections of emergent forms of racial and sexual politics. The last chapter, ‘New Order’, closes the publication with ‘Capital and Its Crises’ and ‘1989’. It addresses the decade’s new regime — in terms of the rapid accession of neoliberal politics as the perceived only game in town, but also as a new conception of, or blindness to, the concept of history itself. The book ends with a series of case studies from the decade’s final year.

The opening tone for the book is set by two acclaimed writers and theorists, Rosi Braidotti and Diedrich Diederichsen, whose contributions speak from their own positions and lived experience of the long eighties and what the era represented for their own theoretical endeavours. In her essay, titled “‘It will have been the best of times: thinking back to the 1980s’”, Braidotti examines the significant moments and places in the epochal analysis that this selection of essays, documents, and case studies seeks to put forward, revealing certain strands of her philosophical studies in a first-person contribution. She reflects on the critiques of orthodox Marxism and the subsequent appearance of new forms of leftist positions, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the

upsurge in conservative ideology, as well as the consolidation of the neoliberal economy. This is interlaced with a consideration of how different discourses were migrating across fields forming new philosophical currents and creating a setting where historical acceleration appears as all but inescapable. Similarly for Braidotti, the issue of representation — both political and aesthetic — and its limits appear as the central problematic marking the time period. What exactly can be said and by whom?

The second opening essay, titled ‘From Anti-Social-Liberal Punk to Intersectional AIDS Activism: (Sub-)Culture and Politics in Eighties Europe’, sees Diedrich Diederichsen sketch a pathway combining political, social, and aesthetic aspects from the eighties. Diederichsen draws on historical sources that not only refer to spheres of discourse and theory, but also stem from the music culture of that period, particularly the punk movement. He analyzes and interrelates fields of experience that belong to diverse categories creating a polyphonic approach to the decade’s political struggles, the transformations at the heart of critical theory and their relationship to artistic practices and youth culture. By tracing the minutiae of a generation characterized by disenchantment and nihilism, the theorist parses a complex, multifocal map, creating a global lens through which to view the decade.

This book is the result of a long period of research and programming across museums and universities in Europe. Over the course of the five-year programme ‘The Uses of Art’, partners within the L’Internationale confederation⁰¹ presented a number of exhibitions that examined the eighties from different social, political, and cultural contexts, exploring the many different counter-narratives that we felt might offer an alternative reading of our recent past. These varied from looking at specific groups or movements to new tendencies in artistic practice, as well as the emergence of different forms of activism within the context of states in processes of radical transition.⁰² In the majority of these exhibitions, the

01 L’Internationale is a confederation of six modern and contemporary art institutions. L’Internationale proposes a space for art within a non-hierarchical and decentralized internationalism, based on the values of difference and horizontal exchange among a constellation of cultural agents, locally rooted and globally connected. It brings together six major European art institutions: Moderna galerija, Ljubljana; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Barcelona; Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, Antwerp; SALT, Istanbul and Ankara, and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. L’Internationale works with complementary partners such as Middlesbrough Institute of Art (MIMA), Liverpool John Moores University, Stiftung Universität Hildesheim and KASK/ University College Ghent School of Arts, along with associate organizations from the academic and artistic fields.

02 Details of all the activities focused on the eighties as part of the ‘Uses of Art’ programmes can be found in the colophon of the book.

various curators and institutions were addressing the eighties from localized perspectives, deliberately using the investigation into microhistories to point to wider societal changes. Indeed, interestingly for many of us involved in working on the eighties, we arrived at this time period independently from our L'Internationale colleagues in other parts of Europe. Each of us had identified the eighties as a moment of significance in understanding our respective recent histories as well as the genealogy of our current moment. Yet, many of these exhibitions and investigations remained — and drew their strength from — their specific locality.

In this respect, the opportunity to place the different microhistories from our respective research on the eighties in dialogue has been one of the main motivations behind the book. Significantly, it has also allowed us to consider many ideas and stories that were not part of our respective exhibitions. It is an opportunity for us as editors — and you as readers — to start to forge connections and affinities between the extraordinary collection of case studies, ideas and events that took place. Many of these connections are addressed in the collection of twelve larger essays that form a major component of the grouping. However, we hope many more constellations will emerge as readers visit and revisit the pages of the book. Our intention here is not to draw equivalences between the contexts. Rather, by placing these case studies in dialogue, we hope they may start to offer an alternative means of navigating Europe's recent history that foregrounds the individuals and localities involved but connects them to similar struggles and desires which they might have hitherto been unaware of. By bringing these stories into convergence within a book, rather than presented through our respective typical bourgeois institutions, we might begin to forge a sense of a complexified collective history that extends across the streets, cities, and organizations of Europe. This collective history, in which a plurality of narratives and identities are implicated, might offer us some help in understanding our present moment and how we arrived where we are, as well as the necessity of forging a future together, no matter how hard and distant that might sometimes feel.

The long journey in making this book would not have been possible without the vision and trust of many people. You, readers, will not necessarily be familiar with all these names, but these are several colleagues

and friends that we would very much like to thank for their collaboration and support. We would like to thank Merve Elveren at SALT and the independent researcher Erman Ata Uncu, both from Istanbul, and Adela Železnik at Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, for their invaluable contribution in bringing together much of the content of this book. Steven ten Thije is a colleague that we must thank most graciously for being the tireless water-carrier of the L'Internationale confederation. Thank you Steven. We thank all of the many contributors to this book for sharing so eloquently your knowledge through the many texts and images that comprise your essays and case studies. Two gatherings are also important to acknowledge: 'When Were the 1980s?', a symposium organized by Ana Bigotte Vieira, Luís Trindade and Giulia Bonalli in Lisbon in 2015, where the editors of this book presented their research and with it the idea of this shared project was born. Secondly, the seminar '1980s — The Multiple Origins of Contemporary Art in Europe Today', organized by Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez and Steven ten Thije at KASK/School of Arts of University College Ghent in 2016, where a number of authors of this publication were brought together. Lastly, we would like to thank our many colleagues in our respective institutions and across the confederation. This book is the outcome of the many conversations we have shared. We recognize that the possibility to work together and exchange ideas over a sustained period of time and across cultural contexts is precious and something not to be taken for granted. We hope it may continue long into the future.

So, with that, dear readers we introduce this book *The Long 1980s*. We hope you will discover stories, histories and herstories that enrich your understanding of the entangled relationship between art, politics, and identities from the eighties, and that we all are living with today.

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