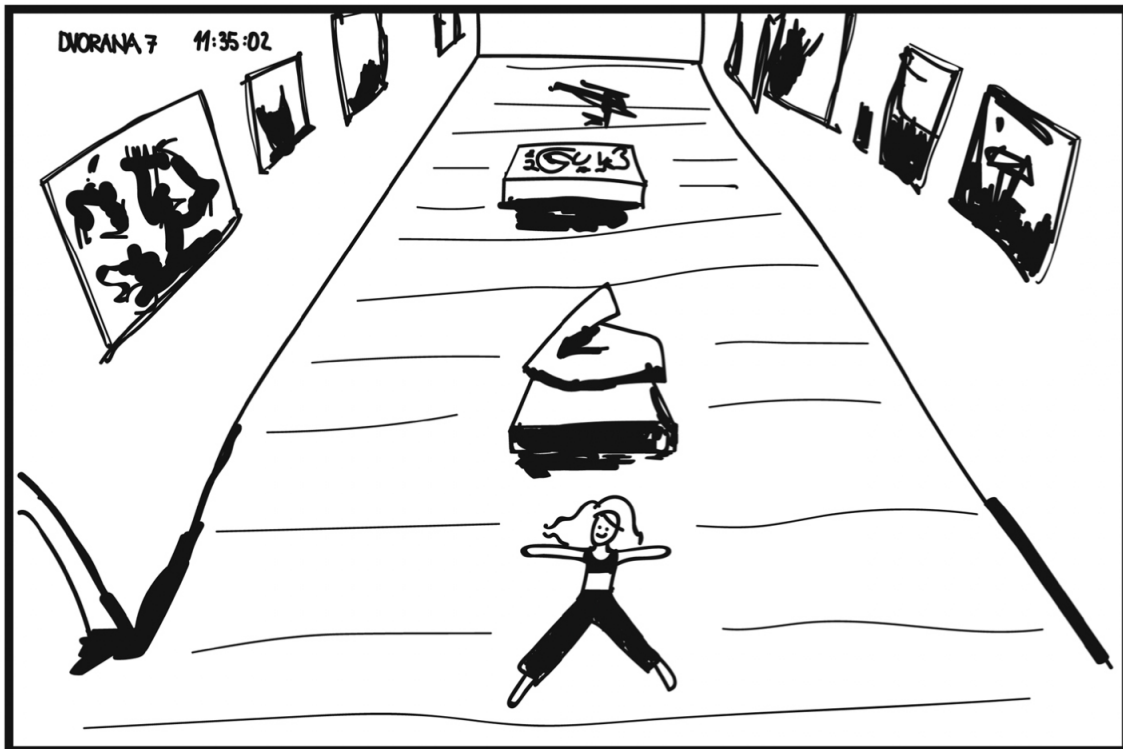




Illustrations by Nika von Ham (2018)

My Post- Catastrophic Glossary

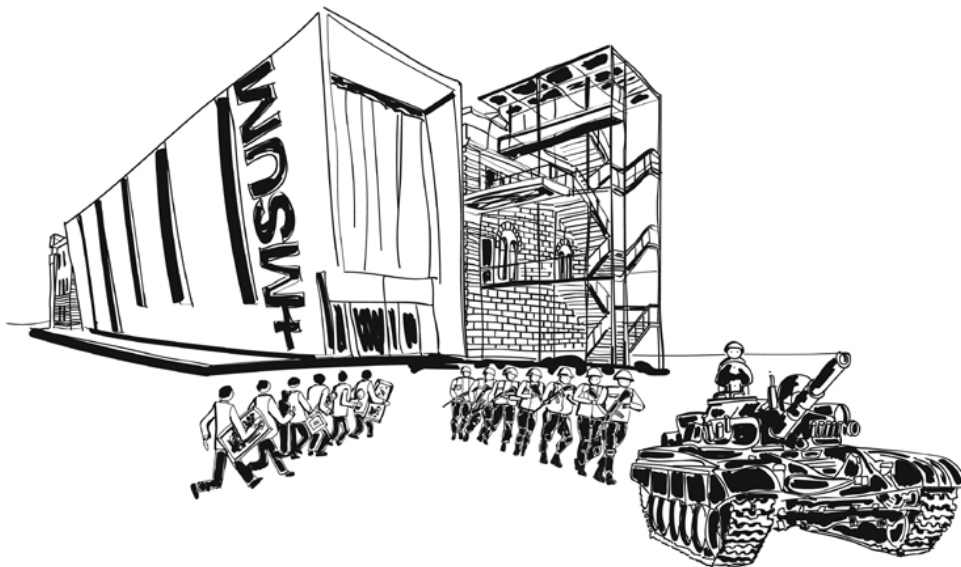
We had nice weather last week in Ljubljana, though I am unsure it still deserves that name. The young artist Nika von Ham and I were hanging out among the ruins of Moderna galerija and stretching our muscles. In the old days, Nika used to guard our collections. I remember she had a strange habit of laying down on the floor and posing for the security cameras. That, she remembers, was her art project. As we chatted, recounting the old days before the catastrophe, she recalled some useful things about the museum. I asked her if she would describe her recollections through drawing. Memories, after all, are the only thing left.





DESTRUCTION

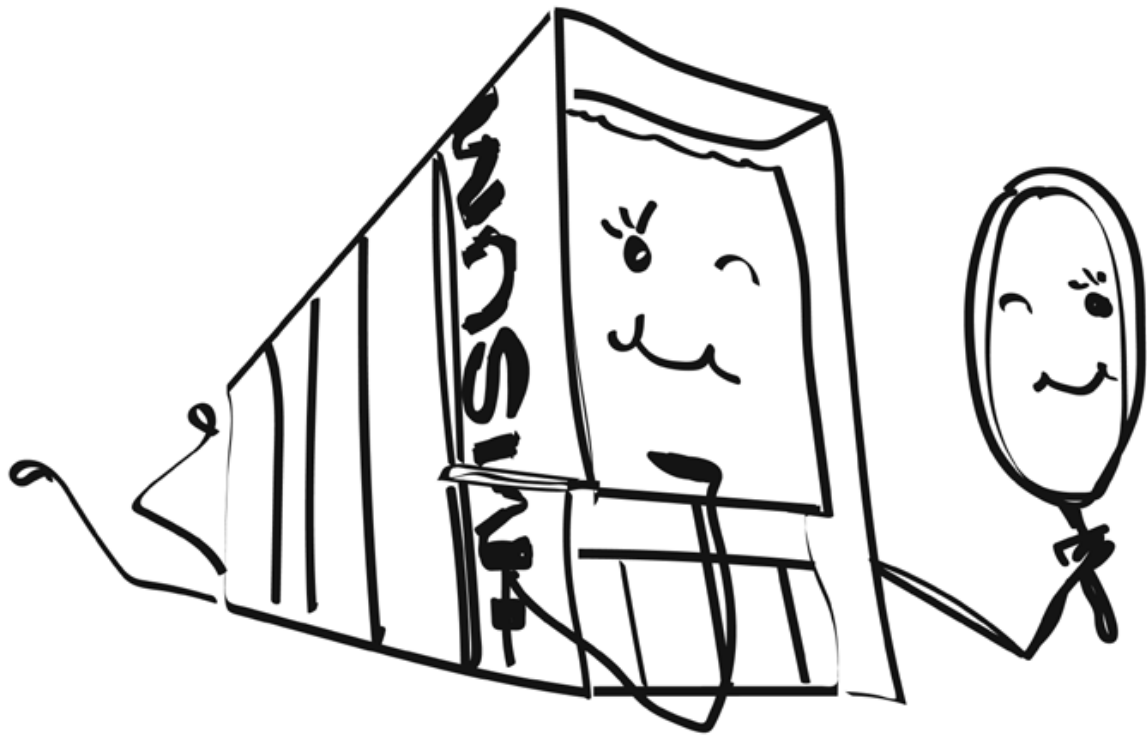
These days my thoughts often drift back to Malevich ... to his demand that all museums be burned to the ground. The only way the artworks they housed could be made relevant again, he said, was if they were incinerated—reduced to ashes, collected in jars, and placed in a pharmacy. Then, he allowed, contemporary artists could use them as a kind of medicine. I also think about Boris Groys, who sometimes reminded me that Malevich's black square touched on the essence of revolution. It was not constructive, it did not imagine a new society, but instead pictured the radical destruction of his society and, indeed, every existing society. As Boris described it, the black square was an image of that destruction; destruction is all that survives permanent change. As such, it countermanded all the imagery of construction that followed the revolution—and, indeed, the project of building an ideal communist society altogether. *Material forces are non-teleological*, Boris said; *they never attain their telos, never reach their end*. Destruction was the only thing Malevich expected from the future. Being a revolutionary artist, on Boris's terms, meant accepting a universal materialistic flow that destroyed all temporary and political orders.



WAR TIME

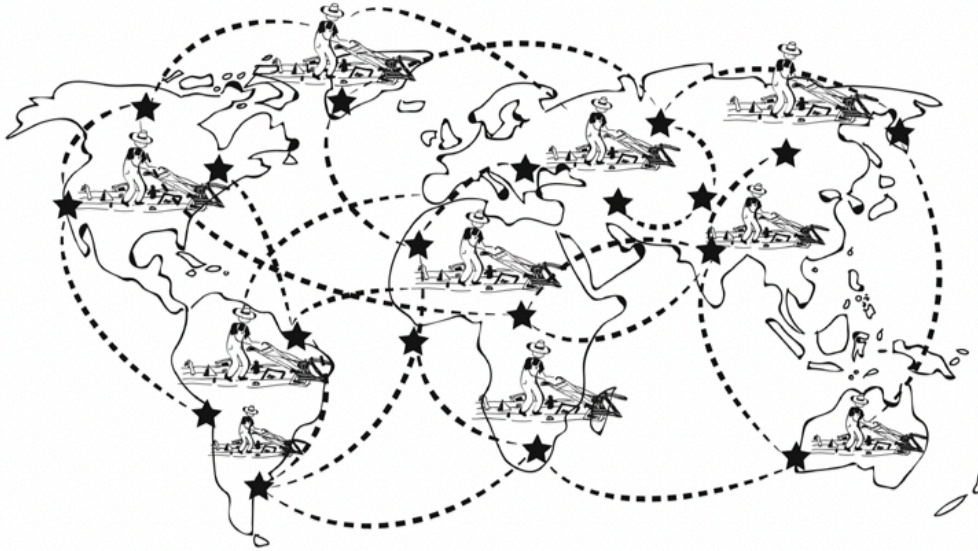
Today, we can speak only about one time, the time of catastrophe. When our museum still existed, we organized its collections around the idea of eleven times, one of which was the time of war. War time was the time of irruption; it brought contemporaneity. When the barracks of the

Yugoslav People's Army were vacated after the army's departure of Slovenia, the building they left behind became a museum of contemporary art. The wars in the Balkans therefore directly inaugurated our contemporaneity. Every second there was a war happening somewhere in the '90s. Contemporary time, as we experienced it, *was* the time of war. How we should respond to war, and specifically the war in our vicinity, was thus a constant question. We assembled a symposium, called *Living with Genocide*, dedicated to the war in Bosnia and the genocide enacted against the Muslim population, and we organized an exhibition: artists donated their works to the future Ars Aevi museum in Sarajevo. Later this was called a museum of solidarity.



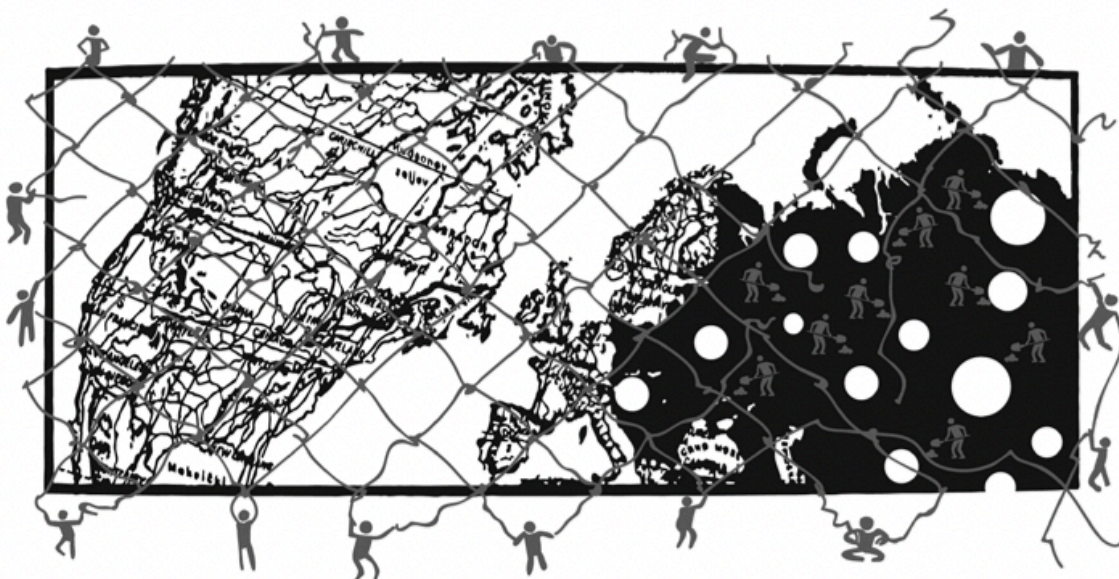
THE SELF-REFLECTION OF THE MUSEUM

Those times, when a museum could be concerned with its own history, seem far away. Before the catastrophe, I believed the museum should be more open, should extend itself outward, into the world. At the same time, I thought it should be more and more concerned with itself, should understand itself as an independent system with its own history. Let me put it another way: a museum was a system that constantly reestablished its relationship toward the outside world. It did so by introducing certain strategies of art into the logic of its work. Not only did it represent art but it tried to observe itself from an outside position. By doing so, though, the museum was confronted by its own traumas and complicities: its instrumentalization by capitalism and ideology, its imbrication in hegemonic systems of knowledge. These pressures had only intensified before the catastrophe, taking forms that were new and hard to recognize.



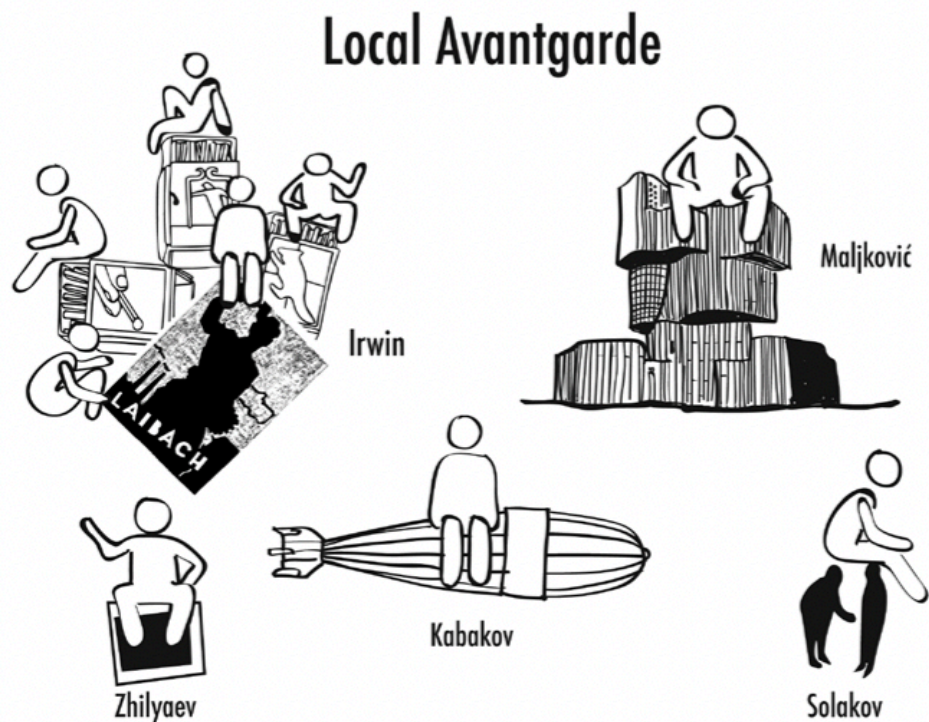
THE AUTHENTIC INTEREST OF THE MUSEUM

Everything is gone now. Yet I remember it so clearly, as if it was right in front of me. Long ago, my work concerned the need to reclaim concepts that had been absorbed by capitalism—ideas like “authenticity” that had come to seem useless or outdated. Capitalism was of two minds about authenticity. On the one hand, it was seen merely as an illusion. On the other, it was presented, within the world of consumption, however cynically, as a quality that commodities may nevertheless possess. We sought to reclaim the idea from this contradiction. Once the master narrative of the West began to crumble, and with it the universalist models of the museum, it became necessary to define the authentic interests of local institutions: their needs and the methods by which they could join international networks. Making connections was the imperative of the time, and it required adjusting to the circulation systems of global capitalism. Authentic interest meant the opposite: a kind of not-adjusting to global capitalist norms. This had little to do with either the cultivation of traditional identities or with isolationism. Rather, we sought connections of a different kind, with institutions and with people around the world who shared our urgencies.



HISTORICIZATION

It seemed at the time that capitalism would last forever. Our museum aimed to resist that system, and the cultural hegemonies that had grown from it. I was committed to the historicization of Eastern European art; that word, historicization, had a specific meaning in my work. It was associated with what was then arriving to history: not only new information into an existing system of knowledge but new ways of thinking that would necessarily transform that system. One of the aims of this kind of historicization was to oppose the single master narrative of history. I imagined a form of history that was not linear, that did not speak of mastery. Historicization was history-in-process, constantly supplementing and interrupting itself.



SELF-HISTORICIZATION

To this idea I added the notion of self-historicization—an idea that emerged from my encounter with certain features of Eastern European art in the socialist era. The local institutions of the non-Western world, when they existed at all, took a dismissive attitude toward such art. Self-historicization was an informal system practiced by artists who, in the absence of any suitable collective history, were compelled to search for their own historical and interpretive contexts. Artists archived documents of their own work, of other artists, of broad art movements and their conditions of production. In the post-socialist period, this practice continued, but assumed new forms and took on new subjects. Critical toward new forces in society that aimed to instrumentalize history, their subjects included the cultural legacy of socialism and, among artists living in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav partisan movement.



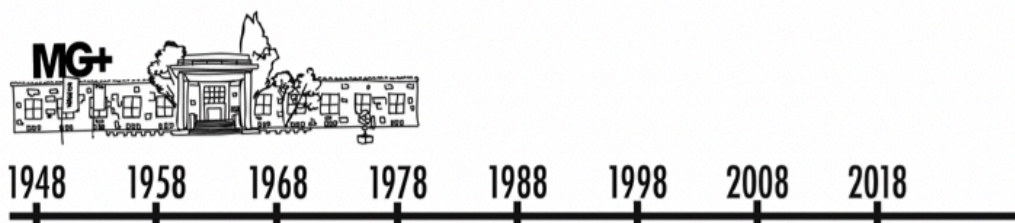
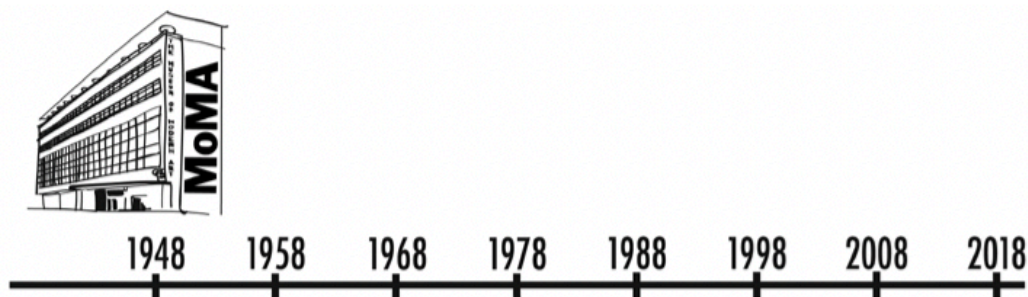
CONTEMPORARY ART

I remember it vividly. In 2011, we started operating in two locations—not only in the existing Moderna galerija but now also in the Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (+MSUM) [Museum of Contemporary Art]. Working across these two sites made it necessary for us to define the difference between a modern museum and a museum of contemporary art. As I thought about it then, contemporary art had two beginnings. The first came in the 1960s with the introduction of conceptual art, Land art, and performance art—or, as we called all of this in Yugoslavia, new art practices. These artists assumed a critical position toward modernism, including its central concepts of the autonomy of art, the originality of the artwork, and the neutrality of the white cube. A second beginning then arrived in the early 1990s with the fall of the communist regimes, the acceleration of the processes of globalization, and the expanded use of digital technology. Contemporaneity was therefore not easily demarcated in simple chronological terms. It did not have just one beginning. Contemporary art engaged most deeply with matters associated with its second beginning: the processes of globalization and their impact on individual local spaces; the instrumentalization of technology, science, ecology, and other forms of knowledge; the colonization of the private sphere; marginalized art traditions; and searching out the potentials of emancipatory social political traditions.



THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Before the founding of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, museums looked primarily to the past, and largely organized art into national schools. With the founding of MoMA, the museum's director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., inaugurated a new understanding of history that differed significantly from that model: a genealogy based on linear time, and advancing universal styles (like geometrical abstraction) over national schools. The museums of modernism that have followed have therefore been more interested in time than geography. Time determined quality for museums of modern art. In other words, a work of art of the highest order should, in a sense, be the quintessence of art's development up to that point, while, at the same time, should also represent the transition to the new. Barr had imagined that this commitment to time would require the museum constantly to move forward—to be both contemporary and modern—yet over time it became primarily a museum of the modern past—a past that accumulated as time moved on.



THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS TIME

The modern and the contemporary were not discrete periods; indeed, the two categories can be said to overlap. The tradition of modernism remained alive right until the end (rumors suggest it may have contributed to the catastrophe); contemporary art in many ways encompassed the history of the modern. Where the two types of museums differed absolutely was in their respective models of time. The modern museum embraced a teleological and linear view of time. The contemporary art museum was characterized, in contrast, by a critique of that model, as well as of the modernist understanding of quality. Quality was connected to newness. What happened first was venerated, and therefore recorded in history. Anything that followed chronologically was automatically seen to lag behind and was, therefore, both irrelevant to the historical record and of questionable quality. Modern art in the non-Western world was, for a very long time, written off in this way as behind the times, a verdict that can only be handed down if one presumes the universal applicability of an unproblematized single and linear time. Today, such matters of order and priority are less important. With no more museums, nothing is “behind” anything else.



NARRATORS

Memories are all we have left today. All books, artifacts, and archives have been destroyed. Not only museums but schools and libraries have been wiped from the face of the earth. Our future will therefore be built only from our memories and what we tell each other, as it was in premodern times. I can still recall whole sentences of Alessandro Portelli's essay on oral histories, though the title escapes me. He wrote that *oral histories were fragmented and tied to the memory and subjective perspective of the individual, group, or class concerned*. He wrote that *while orality is saturated by writing, the memory behind it is not a passive depository of facts but an active process of creation of meanings*. In premodern times, people remembered by telling stories. Only some of those stories were ever written down—and not even by the people who told them, but by learned individuals. After the collapse of the educational system, all memories are now equal, whether the one who recalls them is rich or poor, male or female, black or white. Today we are all narrators, and all narratives count the same. I have to say that I am relieved that I no longer must sit for whole days in front of a computer checking emails. People are listening to each other again! We realize how precious and unique our memories are.