

Beautiful Constructs: An Interview with Tobias Putrih by Thom Collins

Tell me about your family situation when you were growing up.

My mother is a sculptor, my stepfather is an art critic and both of my grandfathers were also sculptors—"traditional" modernists influenced by German New Objectivity. They both built heroic monuments in the first decades of socialism. My mother's father did a big project for Tito's resort island off the Croatian coast. Tito was never a fan of socialist realism; soft, figurative modernism was his favorite. I remember a bust of Tito sculpted in beautiful white marble by my grandfather. Originally it was installed in a central bank but ended up looking at us from a top shelf in our living room in the nineties. Ironically, his head ended up where it belonged—on a shelf in a petit-bourgeois apartment. Ours was a middle-class home with oriental carpets, old furniture, and sculptures and paintings all over the place.

I remember socialism as surprisingly easy. We traveled a lot around Europe. But you can imagine that museums and churches were not much fun for a child. Of course, by the time I was in high school I hated art, and it was the last thing I wanted to deal with. I went to university to study physics instead. But after a little bit more than a year I quit, and after some time off I decided to try art school anyway. It was one of those "whatever" decisions. I had already spent a year traveling and doing almost nothing when I decided it would be nice to have a degree in something. Art school turned out to be great fun. Frankly, I did almost nothing serious; I think that in the year before art school I read and studied on my own more than I did in the subsequent four years.

How did the change in political regime in 1991 impact you?

I don't think that the end of socialism had any *immediate* impact on my life in a material sense. The change in regime initiated a slow process of social, political and economic transition throughout the country.

With regard to the art system, it took probably a full decade to transform itself. Direct support for artists and art institutions was provided by the Ministry of Culture and outside entities like the Soros Foundation, and this created a buffer zone that protected our relatively insulated art community. I think there was great optimism during the 1980s and 90s. The atmosphere was quite energetic.

In the new millennium, when the economic and political transition was over, people suddenly found themselves confronted with a new reality—and new boredom. Slovenia can be an interesting and stimulating place but it's also a small country with many local problems. It also became clear that the state didn't have substantial funds to support visual art production and, on the other hand, that the traditional art market and its collectors had completely disappeared under socialism. This means that an art system had to be slowly rebuilt from the bottom up.

How would you say these circumstances of your childhood and early adult life in Slovenia shaped your mature worldview?

My generation's experience with the socialist system in Yugoslavia was largely positive. Schools were really good and health care was free. We could see all the European and American movies. Our student radio was among the top rated alternative music stations in Europe. I really can't say anything bad about the system, perhaps because I didn't experience it as a mature person. I can say that a slightly younger generation, one that grew up after socialism, was much more competitive and serious than mine. According to western, capitalist standards that's probably good; from my perspective it was strange and sad.

And yet, so much of your work seems to be animated by an interest in the implications of failed utopian propositions and schemes—how can this not, at least in some measure, be a legacy of your early experience with authoritarian socialism?

The question for me has never been about the direct impact of this failed social utopia on my work. It is the issue of how I and other artists coming from the East could find relevant references to back our practices. Contemporary art is in many senses a western affair. The East always functioned on the periphery as a deep, mysterious echo. And after World War II, art there became simply impossible to interpret through dominant western frameworks. To participate in the western system an artist had to move to the West. In the 1990s this idea was suddenly challenged; participation in a global art system seemed possible.

The question then became: which history do we relate to? If we want to relate ourselves to both East and West, how can an art practice be understood outside of the East with no conceptual framework to stitch the lost years of the post-war period—those years of radically reduced cultural communication and exchange—back to the recent art history of the West? Thinking about this as

a young artist, it seemed to me the only practical solution was to analyze the practices of western modernism and to try to find useful strategies for describing my experience in more broadly relevant ways. I think Boris Groys' conceptual framing of Eastern European cultural production was a key influence that helped me to start thinking about the problem.

What did you learn from Groys?

That artistic discourses are in large part formed by specific modalities of collection, and that an artistic practice must find an analogue in a curatorial practice in the largest sense. More specifically, I realized that there was a big problem with Eastern European art because nobody collected it.

Tell me about your formal education. How did you come to art?

High school was strictly science oriented. That's why I decided to study physics at university. I liked mathematics, but physics seemed like a more concrete option. When I gave that up, the art school I attended was a traditional academy, though the sculpture department, where I did most of my work, was much more progressive than the rest of the school.

You came to art prepared as a scientist. Did this immediately impact your artistic production?

I think it was really the opposite. Less than a year after I started university, I was already tired of the whole environment of scientific education. The physics department made me believe that I would never be a good scientist. Maybe that is true, who knows. So, when I arrived at art school, I just wanted to forget all of it. An art academy is a perfect place for such oblivion.

Only later did I realize it is not so simple to walk away. In fact, I realized I'm still quite fascinated with science, with its twisted systems of knowledge, with labs, protocols, machines, diagrams and abstract images.

Can you relate this to two persistent aspects of your work: your reliance on protocols related to those of research science, and your interest in models both conceptual and physical?

In my art practice these "scientific" protocols are important because they offer a distance from which I can observe and study my own process of conceiving and making something. A protocol in art as

in science is just a tool; it's not a signature style. Because more and more I believe art today must be in the first instance practical—it has to propose abstract but applicable inventions, ask and attempt to answer questions that are not strictly self-referential. This imperative insists on what Robert Smithson called the “artist as consultant.” It has its limits, but compared to both expressionism and/or social criticism channeled through art the work produced by this artist-consultant can be more rewarding. My objects and the protocols I follow in making them are far from any radical critical engagement; they are intended in one sense just to start local dialogues.

Blueprints, maquettes, models—these are all representational forms that describe the structure and proposed function of something. I'm interested in these forms as substitutes through which we can explore the potentials of an idea. It is much easier for me to justify the production of an object if I can insist that it is not a finished thing but rather just a proposal for an object or architectural space that will probably never be built. This sounds like a bad excuse because my models are still considered art objects, but for me to float an idea in a provisional form that can easily be remade or disposed of makes sense, because such makeshift objects still beg questions about their own existence.

How aware were you of the recent history of art in Eastern Europe as you were training?

Nobody was much aware of what was going on in Eastern Europe simply because there was no ready framework from which to understand these regionally specific practices. In Yugoslavia there was an art network that I have subsequently learned functioned very well before things fell apart. There was during this time no socialist realism—no official art, no official cultural agenda of any kind in Yugoslavia. The whole art scene during the socialist era has come to be read as a simulacrum of the western scene, but even to the extent that this is a true account, there was still a particular, unique logic to every local production. For example, OHO Group developed what now seems like a really inventive conceptual performance practice inspired or influenced by European and North American trends of the 1960s and early 1970s, but in practice it seems to me that their work was also a rebellion against the specific circumstances of life in Slovenia and the Slovenian art world.

What artistic developments in Slovenian art history are most interesting and were most influential for you?

There were some projects by Slovenian artists just a little bit older than me, like Maja Licul and Janja Zvegeli, who pushed questions about art and objectivity to their limit, and after that they simply stopped making art. I find Janja's piece *Turist* one of the turning points in Slovenian art in the nineties. It involved an action in which she inserted "touristic" photographs of a small town in Slovenia into random books in the town's public library. Looking back I think this was a moment when I stopped and asked myself where and how it would be possible to make an object once again.

How about the art world beyond Eastern Europe?

Ljubljana is three hours from Venice and four hours from Vienna, so I can't claim that there wasn't some influence. Really, even during the socialist era, the borders of Yugoslavia were never closed. Closer to home, the Modern Gallery in Ljubljana developed a strong international art program in the 1990s, but it is hard for me to say now exactly what work from abroad was directly influential. In the late 1990s, Manifesta became a great platform for new European art, and for the first time since World War II it presented a total overview of art on the continent that included Eastern Europe.

But speaking about developments in a larger art field is almost impossible for me because the local context was so overwhelming. I didn't really understand the art world beyond Slovenia when I started working. That's why, for example, it was a little bit hard for me to adapt to the fact that art *objects* are the norm here in market-driven New York. My objects were developed in exactly the opposite kind of environment, one in which I felt the need to invent really good reasons to produce and store objects, for which I knew there was no commercial market.

This influential Slovenian work you spoke of, much of it performance oriented and otherwise ephemeral, was deliberately anti-object, and yet you claim it as a precedent for your very object-centered practice?

It was something for me to react to and against, this milieu. During my studies, I don't think I produced one object that wasn't meant to fall apart. I simply couldn't find a reason to produce another object. Maybe this was just my rebellion against academic rigidity. By the time I was out of the academy, "anti-object" and new media art suddenly became institutionalized and were receiving a large chunk of the state budget. This drove local production, and that seemed

nonsensical to me. I realized that trying to re-invent a way to deal with objects would be a more interesting challenge.

Can you describe in broad terms your intellectual development in these formative years, as you struck out on your own as an artist?

I have almost never studied any subject systematically, so my base of knowledge is probably built to some extent on partial misunderstandings or misinterpretations.

Coming out of science, I was first very much into social constructivism; more precisely, the radical constructivism described by writers like Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. There was also Niklas Luhmann with his social systems theory. I also read a lot about the history of science and alchemy. And during university, the only literature I remember spending more time with was writing on the history of iconoclasm.

Your early practice consisted of "experiments" suggested by various ideas you encountered in this self-guided study?

One consequence of reading and studying like this is that I simply accepted much of the information I encountered uncritically. This is not a productive way to build a base of knowledge, but I felt as an artist that I had some leeway. In truth, I think I was looking around for ideas to support the hypotheses I was already pursuing in my work. I don't think any research, even quantitative research in the natural sciences, can be completely objective. Unlike an artist, a scientist must strive to be objective and offer verifiable conclusions. But my wife, who is a research scientist, just told me some gossip about one very successful scientist in her field who writes his scientific papers first—conclusions and all—and then does all of the experiments in support of his "imagined" theoretical conclusions. That's definitely not how science should proceed, it's not the best way to achieve objective results, but this approach appeals to me as an artist.

Why do you think you were so drawn to this odd constellation of ideas from radical constructivism, social systems theory, alchemy and the history of iconoclasm?

When I quit studying physics, I realized my knowledge of the world beyond that field was very narrow. Then I bumped into radical constructivism, and coming from my scientific background it seemed graspable to me precisely because of its cold, scientific nature. Subsequently, coming across Luhmann's controversial refusal to deal with ethical questions provided an interesting challenge to the poli-

tical situation in Eastern Europe. In general, I think my whole generation grew up trapped inside a strange paradox of late socialist society: being progressive for us was not about being against the authoritarian system, it was just not taking it seriously. Politics never crossed our minds. Even though I subscribed to many ideas of the left, I had problems relating to them when I remembered my parents' struggles with the nonsense of everyday life under socialism. Radical constructivism for me was like a temporary shelter, a way to rethink my position after I quit my scientific education.

My interest in alchemy came from my fascination with the history of early science—with how such a complex, abstract system evolved over time, and the strange imagery it produced. Hermetic alchemy, in particular, was an incredible system of thought that tried to connect the body, matter, and human knowledge to processes of psychological and spiritual transformation.

When I think about the influence such reading had on my work, I think there were certain central concepts that all these discourses shared and that I found particularly stimulating. For example, auto-poiesis—the idea that lifeforms are involved in an ongoing process of self-creation that involves both self-preservation and an exchange of energies and ideas with the world. This means that the final products of such a system are defined by initial conditions, flows of energy and systemic flaws. It also means that each system is self-referential and that there is no meaning outside it. But in every system there is also the possibility for exchange since each is ultimately about adaptation in the interest of self-preservation.

How, specifically, do you attempt to engage such ideas in your work?

There is only the sediment of these influential ideas in the finished work. The projects in which objects are built collectively by groups, for example, start with a simple proposition—certain preconditions—a given productive environment, materials and hardware, and then the process evolves accordingly. These productive processes can be described as "self-regulated" and interpreted as little constructivist experiments. The *Baltimore Experiment* is the most direct example. Despite the fact that the project disallowed verbal communication during a collective building process with only cursory ground rules, each of the objects produced, built by ten different volunteers, nonetheless evolved efficiently according to unspoken, unarticulated rules. This means that the majority of the participants decided upon the same basic rules under the same conditions at a certain stage in the building process. Such a process can be described as fundamentally auto-poietic, though this shouldn't be the only interpretation of the Baltimore piece.

What about your interest in alchemy?

The main difference between the science of today and this early science is that these early practitioners had a chance to practice alchemy—with its spiritual, transcendent dimension—while doing a more purely empirical science. Take Isaac Newton for example—the state of knowledge at the time allowed him to hold both sets of ideas and beliefs simultaneously. Today, when I say I believe in science, I think of this as completely distinct from my spiritual life. And this points to a fundamental difference between early and modern science. What science has lost—a certain fluidity with regard to these issues and a unity of perception—was to a certain extent preserved in modern artistic practices, from Duchamp to Kiesler to Smithson. That interests me. How did our understanding of the relationship between thought and action, spiritual and social engagement, the individual and society, evolve along these lines? It's a field full of tensions and contradictions.

Why your fascination with iconoclasm?

Well, I asked myself why images matter, why art matters. Why have people responded so emotionally to blocks of stone? Why do people worship or revile certain images? The study of iconoclasm first offered me a historical perspective on these questions about the power of representation. As I've explained, at the time I was studying these ideas I was unable to find a good reason to produce any *thing*. Probably this exploration was the catalyst that finally enabled me to produce a series of objects in my final year at the academy that were focused very explicitly on issues of reception.

Can you describe these pieces?

One was a makeshift walk-in camera obscura I situated in front of the academy. Inside you could see an inverted image of the academy building. Another was a fluorescent, organic-shaped platform in Metelkova—an artists' squat community in a former army barracks in Ljubljana. And another was a white, life-size replica of a Disney character. There were six, seven projects like this. I wanted to test the public's response to these objects by placing them in provocative environments.

I'd like to try to locate your subsequent practice vis-à-vis the four broad subjects that run through your work: cinema, architecture and design, science and collaborative production.

Just to clarify: I see architecture and design as thematic blocks, while scientific protocols and collaboration are productive processes.

When I began, I simply couldn't understand how one could justify the production of more and more things. At first, I tried making models and props for imagined movies—movies that "will never happen." And then I went overboard in this direction, removing these models further and further from real sources. It became a game of fetishistic delay and fixation on substitutes. The work on cinema architecture came out of these experiments. I gradually became excited about the history and phenomenology of the movies—cinema spaces in particular. In some ways, I thought of the auditorium as an in-between space between the hard reality of street experience and the fantastic, theatrical, fictional realm of the film itself. Historically, so many architects had used cinema spaces as an excuse for the most unbelievable escapism. I started to see these transitional territories as socially valuable, and this realization led me to experiments with the idea of art and design as manipulative but also potentially therapeutic and socially ameliorative practices.

This is directly related to the similarly in-between nature of early science. I would say that in all of these instances, I am interested in situations where the hard facts of reality start to dissolve into fictional constructions—and by implication, where fictional constructions open onto new realities. These slips can happen on many different levels. They can happen for the individual and manifest as delusions, but they can also be encouraged at the social level and be a very powerful tool of ideology, social and political control. Not only do art, design and science tolerate such deviations, but these slips are fundamental to their productive dynamics. I think it would be interesting to trace all the twisted minds of the twentieth century that made major breakthroughs this way. The artistic avant-garde has certainly been fertile ground for such characters, and that is why people like Fredrick Kiesler interest me so much. Perhaps science has always been more welcome territory for this kind of slippage than we imagine. We do have many cases of prominent scientists overstepping what are taken to be the accepted boundaries of scientific thought and activity, accelerating toward what I call "beautiful constructs"—as much art as science, perhaps more. Take for example Alexander Graham Bell. He wanted to fly. His kite structures were technical dead-ends, but they were feats of engineering and really beautiful conceptual objects. He couldn't admit this though,

and he kept financing experiments. The results are fascinating, but not from a practical, scientific point of view.

Since you deal with such a wide range of ideas and materials, some wonder if you have any consistent critical frames: just re-reading the basic nature of these practices through an uncritical re-making would be naïve.

I don't think art is about consistency. It's about complexity. I'm interested in disparate practices and the only progressive way I've found to work with them is to simulate them, to redesign and remake their key products, to re-function them in compelling ways and to present them in art contexts. I have finally learned how to make objects. At their core they are, in my terms, also manipulative objects that point to their own complex origins, nature and ideological underpinnings. The key question for me is how to make an object that expresses its own self-doubt, questions its own existence. On a formal level, this means exploring conceptual and material processes, which often leads to the production of objects that are fragile and temporary and that are in some ways quite random. This is another way to question the value of the art object as a category of thing in the world.

This notion of things and places as "transitional objects and territories" that are "manipulative," "therapeutic" and "socially ameliorative"—what is the mechanism here, and do you intend to offer a critique of this idea, this function in historical practices, or are you isolating and testing the mechanism itself?

I'm trying to understand these technologies and their power. I do this by producing altered models of their machinery. It is like testing a strange hypothesis. Cinema is an excellent phenomenon for me to study as it functions subtly and is thus a powerful ideological tool. The spaces designed to house movies are transitional territories between harsh reality and fantasy. At crucial moments in the last century cinema gained a huge power that has been used and abused by all kinds of regimes. I am interested in concepts like fetishism and spectacle as they are relevant to this history, and I play with material forms that have been or could be employed to exploit the psycho- and social dynamics associated with them.

But are you ultimately interested in the individual's experience of the material world as a force in shaping her/his consciousness of self and others?

I would say so, but it is sometimes hard for me to step out of the art context. I have difficulty believing that art shapes consciousness in any direct way. Art, like science, proposes and tests abstract concepts. It is up to other practices to take what we learn from these experiments and to apply new insights to the solution of real problems. That's the difference between art and design, art and architecture, or even theoretical and applied science—we need the abstractions of the one to get us to the other. I wouldn't go as far as to say that art can shape social experience. It is just a step at the beginning of the process of individual and social change.

Is the "beautiful construct" then your idea of a form that has escaped scientific logic but retains traces of its relationship to rational, objective thought and objective processes?

Yes, I find this very beautiful, but it's probably a scientist's worst nightmare.

Must your projects always speak both to the promise of the utopian propositions that give rise to them and to the inevitable flaws in logic and/or failures in practice that undermine these utopian schemes?

Such entropy fascinates me. Every utopia anticipates a possible meltdown, otherwise it wouldn't be a utopia. This fact must be acknowledged and addressed. The logic and the psychology of this fact stimulate me. Really, it's not just every utopian scheme that necessarily relies on this dynamic, but every system of knowledge—they all have their own "black holes."

Can we tie this idea back to your experience with the failures of authoritarian socialism? And what are the lessons to be learned from these failures through art?

It seems inevitable that many of my interests arise from my experience with the flaming out of a more or less authoritarian socialism, but I really don't actively think about this. I find it hard to step back and be objective about this experience and its impacts. The only thing I can identify as a direct legacy is my relativism. For example, it would not be hard to imagine an authoritarian state with happy citizens. A massive failure like this one makes you think about its lessons, but my fascination with and meditation on this failure are

ultimately more about trying to understand and connect the missing parts. When I moved to Germany and later to New York, I became aware that growing up in Yugoslavia during this social experiment in the seventies and living through its breakdown in the nineties was quite a unique experience, different even from those of others living at the same time in Soviet bloc countries. The Balkans have been a difficult place to understand and on top of that Slovenians would like to believe that we are part of the Balkans only when it suits us. So, I guess part of the ambiguity of my work is a function of this complexity.