

VIE CEE

The Vision of a City
Vienna Could be.

Wolfgang Lehrner

CEE: Fact or Fiction?

Jade Niklai

Central Europe is not a state: it is a culture or a fate. Its borders are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation.

Milan Kundera: *The Tragedy of Europe*, New York Review of Books, vol 31, no 7, April 26, 1984, p. 6 (trans. from French to English by Edmund White)¹

In 1984, with the emergence of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, and almost a decade after he left his native Czechoslovakia, Milan Kundera penned his passionate critique of post-1945 Europe: *The Tragedy of Central Europe*. In his evocative signature style, Kundera appealed to the international community to take notice of this tragic blind spot and its effect on the fate of the whole of Europe.

He continued: *At the beginning of our [20th] century, Central Europe was, despite its political weakness, a great cultural center, perhaps the greatest. And admittedly, while the importance of Vienna, the city of Freud and Mahler is readily acknowledged today, its importance and originality make little sense unless they are seen against the background of the other countries and cities that together participated in, and contributed creatively to the culture of Central Europe.* (Ibid., p. 6)²

It is with these thoughts in mind and my own recent relocation from the periphery of Central Eastern Europe (Budapest) to the capital of Central Europe (Vienna), that I encountered Wolfgang Lehrner's *VIE CEE* project in 2013.

VIE CEE is a collection of still and moving impressions, collated over 15 visits to the former posts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, including Budapest, Prague, Sarajevo, Lviv and Timisoara. It presents over 200 video sequences and a selection of photographs, which poignantly remind us of time's simultaneous passing and freezing in these forgotten nooks of old Europe. The artist's aim was to create the juxtaposition of a quintessentially Central Eastern European milieu and to propose Vienna as its reinstated capital. The locations were selected for their shared pasts and for their proximity to Vienna: each destination was reached in less than a day's travel by public transport. The result is a collage of visual impulses, presented as five multi-channel video installations and a selection of film stills.



The Diplomat Suite (1 channel, 18 sec.) depicts the most elegant room in Belgrade's Moskva Hotel as a beige generic interior with a bright chirpy animation, projected on a large LED screen. Without a contextual understanding, we could imagine this as a business hotel in Zhengzhou or an airport hotel in Dallas: an archetypal contemporary hotel interior, adorned with an orchid pot plant and the standard amenities of bottled water and a packet of potato chips.

Lehrner's insightful installation *Color* (8 color prints, 90 x 50 cm each) is a visual reminder of the Habsburg Empire's uniform yellow building façades, which were reserved for municipal and socially esteemed locations during the Empire's 350-year reign. Here the signature yellow – a vibrant shade of yellow, bordering on sunset orange – appears in a

multitude of locations across time: a monarchy-era building, a bridge, a flimsy cigarette kiosk in the middle of an industrial intersection, a Soviet-era housing estate, a boarded-up street-front location and as a rectangular box on the side of an old building, which looks more like a film set than a real place in real time.

In *VIE CEE* humans are an accidental encounter, appearing more as incidental performers in a broader narrative driven by their surroundings. Here the main protagonists are the cities themselves: the remnants of history, which both testify to and defy the course of time.

Metropolis (3-channel video, random loop of 138 videos) eludes its title by presenting a series of unexpected locations: an abandoned Modernist building; a solar-paneled council estate surrounded by original Roman ruins; a

limousine parked in front of a burnt-out building; a corroding train at a rundown station; rural idyllic scenes with an occasional bystander. There are also images of new corporate architecture, endless cityscapes of decaying concrete and a whitewashed courtyard, devoid of any hint of a past. The overall impact is not of a grand metropolis, established in history and preserved by time, but of a cacophony of forgotten places, interwoven by different epochs and corroded by negligence.

Lehrner's project is enticing, above all for its effort to look to the East from the West, not vice versa. It is rare to observe a contemporary Viennese artist focus on the forgotten neighbors of its past and to propose a positive future for the CEE's reconciliation with Vienna. Lehrner's project leaves the observer with a prototypical impression of Central Eastern Europe: a place commemorated by the writings of Stefan Zweig and recently recalled with longing nostalgia by American filmmaker Wes Anderson.³ At the same time, *VIE CEE* reveals the indiscriminate gray veil of 50 years of Soviet rule, confirming Kundera's fear of the irreversible consequences of 20th-century history.

The question remains as to whether Kundera's alternative definition of Central Europe as "*situated geographically in the center, culturally in the West and politically in the East*",⁴ can be redefined in the 21st century and we can consider Lehrner's proposal of *VIE CEE* as a genuine prospect.

1) [www.euroculture.upol.cz/dokumenty/sylaby/Kundera_Tragedy_\(18\).pdf](http://www.euroculture.upol.cz/dokumenty/sylaby/Kundera_Tragedy_(18).pdf)

2) Later in this essay Kundera confirms their multi-cultural roots: Freud was born in Moravia to Galician parents, and Mahler came from a German-speaking minority enclave in eastern Bohemia. Both were of Jewish descent.

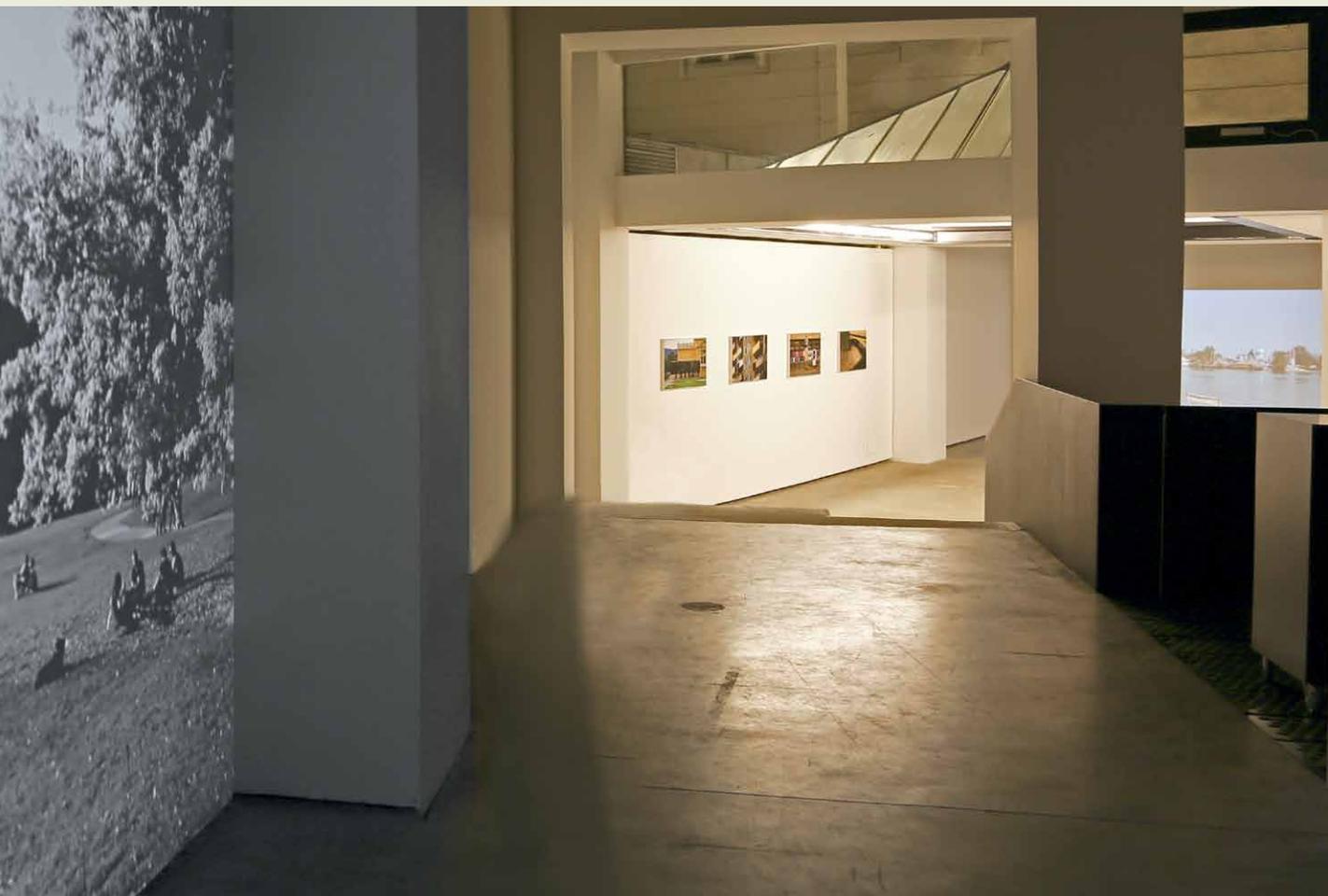
3) See film *Grand Hotel Budapest*, Wes Anderson (dir.), 100 min, 2014; and the associated publication *The Society of the Crossed Keys*, Wes Anderson (ed.), Pushkin Press, 2014

4) [www.euroculture.upol.cz/dokumenty/sylaby/Kundera_Tragedy_\(18\).pdf](http://www.euroculture.upol.cz/dokumenty/sylaby/Kundera_Tragedy_(18).pdf), p. 1



Jade Niklai

is a curator with a focus on contemporary art, architecture and design. She has fulfilled curatorial positions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest and at London's Architecture Foundation. Born in Hungary, raised in Australia, educated and trained in England and America; Jade's international background and professional outlook make her a strong believer that the arts motivate cultural diversity, tolerance and social integration. Jade Niklai has been Blood Mountain's founding director since 2010 and is a freelance art writer and juror. www.bloodmountain.org



Exhibition views: VIE CEE, Franz Josefs Kai 3 (BAWAG P.S.K. Contemporary), Vienna, 2013