

The Representation of Public Memory in the Millennium
Artistic Projects +2000/-2000, *Even* by Osvaldo Romberg,
and *General Reminder* by János Sugár and Yuri Leiderman
(edition 2)

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The representation of public memory became a popular exhibition practice after the collapse of the Soviet bloc as a reaction to the official ideological narratives, which previously gave no place to the people's own experience of historical events. Another lacuna of the historical narrative, which was also addressed in exhibitions, was the absence of East European art history in Western art history books. At the same time, these new narratives of public memory coexisted with smaller artistic endeavors which addressed the theme of memory in a way of their own that was not translatable into the logic of general post-Soviet historical discourse.

The proof-reader changed the meaning of the sentence in a way that it became wrong. To change it back to what I wanted to say: "Against the background of extensive international group exhibitions such as *After the Wall* and *Aspects/Position*, which sought to fill gaps in the representation both of more private memories and of art from the countries of the former Warsaw Pact, the solo/duo exhibitions +2000/-2000, even by Osvaldo Romberg and *General Reminder* by János Sugár and Yuri Leiderman tried to shift attention to different stories, thinking about history and our memory about it from the perspective not of a century, but a millennium." This text is an attempt to present a viewer reaction to what Romberg, Sugár and Leiderman tried to say with their millennial exhibitions. I am aware that I may be trying to read into them some meanings which were probably not there, but is this not the only way to relate to history spanning more than 1000 years?

Another purpose here is to ask how artists are testing the ability and right of museums/galleries to act as institutions of public memory. The contradiction between the bourgeois character of the art museum on the one hand and the artistic will-to-freedom on the other hand has been a much-discussed subject during recent decades. In his book *Conceptual Art*, the contemporary art historian Tony Godfrey describes as follows the changes that have occurred in this discourse:

An earlier generation of artists, from Henry Flynt to Robert Smithson, had hated the museum to the point of waging war on it; they saw it as dead—as corrupt as the commercial gallery system. But now artists use the museum. It has become not a site of unspecified evil, but a place to research and negotiate new meanings. If the museum was where things were made special, where meanings and values were discovered and preserved, then it had to be an ideal forum for the critical artist. By the mid-1990s the curating of shows in museums by the artists themselves had become almost a genre in its own right.¹

Museum institutions and artists, therefore, tried to find a compromise or sometimes a symbiosis, a mutually beneficial way of coexisting. Both museums and artists strive for reconciliation. While artists experiment with the role of curators, museums/galleries are keen to offer their premises as an artistic laboratory space.

The Metaphorizing of History by Public Memory: Oswaldo Romberg's Installation +2000/-2000, even at the End of the Millennium

In many books, old or new, academic or popular, well-structured or written under the influence of transient inspiration, there exist hundreds of definitions of history. One of these belongs to Jorge Luis Borges: “perhaps universal history is nothing but the history of a few metaphors.” The exhibition +2000/-2000, *Even* by Oswaldo Romberg, an Argentinian artist with Russian-Jewish roots, opened simultaneously on May 28, 1996 at 6:00 p.m. in different museums throughout the world. In my opinion, this exhibition of Romberg presented an expanded interpretation of Borges' aphorism.

Oswaldo Romberg, born in Buenos Aires in 1938, belongs to that group of the twentieth-century artists who chose the strategy of demystifying the European view on history and art. Commenting on Romberg's major works from the late seventies, Dominique Nahas points out in the preface to the catalogue of the exhibition +2000/-2000, *Even—Mythologies, from Altamira to Manet – An Emotional Analysis of Art History* that Romberg attacked the clichés of “art history and the myths of art-making.”² The purpose of Romberg's effort was to undermine the monopoly of classical art history discourse by demonstrating that “*history doesn't exist, only artists exist.*”³ Continuing to develop this theme in the 1990s, Romberg experimented with the next question—whether history exists as a consistent story of the people in

the universe. By his installation +2000/-2000, *Even*, he testifies that the history of the last 4000 years can be represented only as a set of short morals and separate images.

The techniques that Romberg uses in his installation are collages composed of pictures cut out from art books and journals and short texts from books on history with words singled out to make meaningful phrases. Each *text-collage* unit is scotch-taped to a glass rectangle hanging from the ceiling. Every composition has its own *negative*—a black silhouette reproduced in the mirror reflecting the figure formed by the collage's pictures. By creating this double image, Romberg accentuates the idea of positive/negative evaluation of the same historical event, time, or person, and the idea is also visible in the exhibition's title: +2000/-2000, *Even*. The word "even", as in the grammatical construction "even now/then", emphasizes the regularity of historical events. The back surfaces of the collages are painted in red, yellow or brown, "depending on the 'crisis' condition of the historical moments in each of the civilizations that is being commented upon."⁴ Using these techniques, Romberg demands from his viewers that they try to compile all parts of the framed glass rectangles, and later understand the impossibility of this task.

This installation, organized at the end of the millennium in the galleries of fourteen cities—Philadelphia, Kassel, Vienna, Cologne, Saarbrücken, Buenos Aires, Budapest, Reykjavik, Tel Aviv, Santo Domingo, Barcelona, Chemnitz, Odessa, and Tokyo—attempts to introduce the universal history of humankind, and at the same time serves as a discourse on the possibility of the representation of such a history. To achieve the first aim, Romberg makes use of the function of human imagination. The way he joins the pictures and marks text sometimes seems obvious, as, for example, when he composes a collage from a photograph of Jackson Pollock, who was painting at the moment when the photo was taken, and a text drawn from an article on Syria's history—"language is possible without words." Sometimes it is difficult to guess what meaning unites the parts of a collage. By this method, Romberg preserves the viewers' right to invent their own interpretations of the collages. Nahas notes that Romberg's works "force us to reconstitute and recapitulate how we have assembled our interpretations of what we consider 'truthful' in history."⁵ Romberg demonstrates that the truth of universal history is the result of our own imagination and the need to create meaningful connections between objects and events. That is why, to achieve his second aim, "the artist forces us to reconsider the traditional relation between text and illustration through time."⁶ He problematizes both connections between

them that are traditionally taken for granted and the possibility of history as a narrative.

One of Romberg's texts, derived from *Aleph* by Jorge Luis Borges, announces that "within text that is visible, it is possible to identify hidden texts where everything touches everything."⁷ This is a formula which can be used to explain his work with texts. Romberg introduces the theme of universal history by claiming that "every image could be replaced with another image."⁸ The elements of history are a collection of splinters of real events, a memory and a repetition. *Everything touches everything* in universal history, but the way we know it is by selecting fragments of our memory. "The divine powers of memory are used to remember certain places by means of images."⁹ To remember, people need to find analogies, so the realm of history turns into a set of recognizable images and dictums, into metaphors of the events. The universal is represented as a mixture of scattered historical motives, like the collages on glass.

The exhibition itself follows the rules of people's memory of history. Organized in different places all around the world, it reveals and at the same time is subjected to the laws of scattering and repetition. Therefore, the metaphor for all parts of the installation is the Tower of Babel from Genesis, which describes the idea of universal history as such. The image of the Tower of Babel refers to the time when people had one language and one history. The story of their life was universal history. The real Tower is now lost and we refer to it as an ideal. Building the Tower, however, was excessive and contradicted the divine order of the world. God's solution, therefore, was to scatter people by separating their languages—the first in the history of subsequent separations of peoples, which also led to a change in the idea of historical narration. Separated people can have universal history only as a collection of splinters of real events, selected moments of memory.

Romberg accumulates analogies in his project to support the ideas of separation and repetition as the law of universal history as we perceive it today. From this point of view, the Tower of Babel and its destruction is our real history, which we try to grasp in the narration—or rather, multiple narrations—the unity that permanently exists yet at the same time is scattered through the multiplicity of languages which nevertheless seek to describe this history. Universal history is represented only in the form of slivers—memorized words and images. Public memory is the only way for scattered people to preserve universal history, by collecting the broken pieces of the past in the form of common metaphors.

Developing the Tower of Babel theme, Romberg organized the discussion of the Genesis (11: 1 – 9) fragment among contemporary intellectuals: “from a philosopher from Philadelphia to a Chinese critic. From a famous Korean video artist to art student attending the State University of New York.”¹⁰ He collected their reflections on the Biblical metaphor as excerpts from different languages. Because, as Marc Scheeps, the director of Museum Ludwig, Cologne, puts it “the tower of Babel is in us and everywhere.”¹¹ The Tower of Babel metaphor continues to challenge us. Still, questions remain. The critic Carlos Basualdo asks: “is it being suggested, from the beginning, that there is a relationship between babelic confusion and historical outcome? Is it being said... that there is history because there is confusion and that confusion is indeed the substance of history, of multiple, changing histories?”¹²

Nonetheless, this exhibition is not only about history. It is also about the place of an artist in history. “The world of art cannot function without inheritance,”¹³ claims Romberg, because an artist needs images, materials, and cultures to form and represent. Nothing can emerge from nothing in the world of mortals. Yet the writing of history is itself a work of art. “Metaphor” in Greek means “to carry, to transport.” Taken literally, this word explains Romberg’s technique of singling out words and cutting out images. Carrying pictures and texts from different sources and contexts, he accomplishes a metaphorical act and creates his own context for the discussion. He takes pieces out of their historical environment using the artistic technique of cutting out, marking, and fastening together, similarly to how memory selects fragments from the past and assembles them by means of association, choice, and repetition. In this way, Romberg understands the possibility of contemporary universal history not as the pictures we see or the texts we read but as the act of metaphorizing the past in the public memory, as the sound of snipping scissors in the hand of an artist.

The Representation of Public Memory per se: The Exhibition General Reminder by János Sugár and Yuri Leiderman

The way in which János Sugár (Hungary) and Yuri Leiderman (Russia) use the museum space is different in comparison with Romberg. Their project *General Reminder* is a *nomadic* adventure rather than an installation. It was meant as a trip without any planned end or certain destination. Thus *General Reminder* cannot be completed because the project cannot be fulfilled in the space of a gallery. The realization of their idea is the *continuity* of artistic

experiments. *General Reminder* is an exhibition that uses the museum primarily as a laboratory in which two artists try to invent the “catalysis”¹⁴ that allows them to refer to public memory without presupposing the existence of the public itself.

General Reminder was initiated by Victor Misiano, a well-known Russian curator, as an attempt to create the concerted actions of two artists who had not known each other before. In the catalogue, Misiano tells the story of the origin of this project:

The idea of this exhibition ... was born ... in Budapest in an absolutely private context. We were sitting in a cozy restaurant – János Sugár, Katalin Néray and me – and in the course of the conversation, I felt that Yuri Leiderman was missing. I felt that he would be interested in the subject we were discussing and that he would have a lot to add. I felt also that his personality fit perfectly with the intimate, confidential and intellectually tense atmosphere we had established. Motivated by this feeling of absence, I said that János and Yuri should meet, should be in dialogue and should in some way do a show together. In other words, this show appeared not as a professional project, but as a human fact.¹⁵

The artists’ collaboration resulted in a series of exhibitions organized in five European cities: Budapest (1998), Gdansk (1999), Zagreb (1999), Moscow (2000), and Paris (2000). Each exhibition varied from the previous one, thus representing the development of the artists’ cooperation. Sugár and Leiderman provided visitors with hand-drawn “informative sheets” for every exhibition that mapped the installed objects to make them easier to remember and understand. However, their initial idea to supply visitors with information was significantly different. They wanted to arrange a subscription for the catalogue (planned as “informative sheets”), which would be provided not earlier than a month after the exhibition ended. In this way, visitors would have some kind of explanation when they had already almost forgotten what they had seen. Although this idea existed only as a part of the preparatory plan, it characterizes the artists’ intention not to help the viewers to comprehend the meaning of the exhibited objects but only to hint at the possibility of comprehension.

The idea of *General Reminder* as formulated by Sugár and Leiderman can be described by two interconnected themes. The first, which was proposed by Sugár, is the theme of “nonsense which has the structure of a meaning but can be understood only later ... which might have a meaning, but it is not obvious, or non-transparent.”¹⁶ The second was introduced by Leiderman:

For me (and it seems for Janos as well) that show was mostly not about ... conceptualization of this or that kind of "communication" which is so trendy now, ... but about something more concrete and particular, about the appearance of stories, images somewhere in the nebulous zone between us.¹⁷

The artists seem to be speaking about different subjects: Leiderman tries to visualize the public memory of stories unconsciously accepted in the *past*, while Sugár thinks about a work of art that would carry *future* involvement into the sphere of public memory. Yet in the latter case, "future" is taken to be a future understanding of the objects' meaning, which stems from the present, the present of Sugár's artistic activity and its creative results. Leiderman proposes to refer to already existing meanings that unite the sphere of Western narration and, at the same time, remain as proto-verbalized ground for it. Sugár considers the time when the creation of objects defining the meaning, the sense of understanding, only just begins. Both interpret the situation of a visitor who according to their plan would "un-understand" rather than understand the meaning of their works, and this would simulate an ordinary situation of social interaction. Every person plunges into the stream of meanings preserved in public memory, but s/he can understand only a part of them. The rest exist as nonsense, as an un-understandable flood of stories. Leaving visitors' questions un-answered, and visitors themselves in a state of perplexity, the artists seek to represent the nature of public memory itself. Public memory is *something* (and uncertainty here is more correct than attempts at naming) that exists *between* narrations, *between* realized meanings. Yet according to Leiderman, this means not that nonsense has no order but that this order cannot be understood as information distributed by means of communication.

In consequence, to represent their ideas, Sugár and Leiderman had to find a means of their own that lay outside the road of narrative culture but made constant reference to it. The most obvious examples to describe their way of going beyond/between stories are two works by Leiderman: *Lobytangi* and the portraits of Eskimos with tattoos. In the preparatory correspondence Leiderman describes *Lobytangi* as a pack of paper dogs, each of which has its legs in a different position. The artist underlines that dogs should look like toys. He calls this object "Lobytangi," because this name, for him, hints at a "North Asian" word and can be compared with real Siberian city names such as "Neryungi" or "Khatanga."¹⁸ Describing the Eskimo portraits, Leiderman gives an even more detailed explanation of his idea:

There are images that interested me now that perhaps I'll use in our show. Some of them deal with Eskimos (kinds of hallucinogenic tattoos, which Eskimos might use if they used tattoos – they never do in fact). For me, they are trustworthy signs, the spectator will trust them as meaningful signs, even ethnographic, but having no links to reality—they are absolutely meaningless by themselves.¹⁹

Both objects can remind visitors of something with which they have already played (paper dogs), or that they have already studied (the culture of Eskimos), something from their almost forgotten past but with small changes. Leiderman's simulation of real things is so skillful that some viewers do not notice that they are looking at fakes. They can believe, for example, that Eskimos really have those tattoos, or that children really play with those dogs. Represented objects create a certain feeling of getting in touch with something already known. Nevertheless, being just pure references to past knowledge and experience, they refer not to certain things but to memory as such. This memory, which covers motives and subjects of common culture, is *public memory*, something that is partly realized but mostly unconsciously accepted in people's knowledge about a common past, about cultural, social, political, economic, and scientific history.

The success of *General Reminder* as an exhibition was at the same time its failure. It was successful because Sugár and Leiderman fulfilled their preliminary decision "from show to show ... to investigate and establish some points of similarity and intersections between [their] works."²⁰ The artists' correspondence gives us many examples of how they managed to find the unity of their ideas in visual form.²¹ However, this exhibition could be considered a failure from the point of view of the public, which was left with uncertainty as to the meaning of this event. Yet the artists envisaged a separation of the public from the observation of the entire progress of their actions. In a letter to Leiderman, Sugár proposes: "I see our future cooperation as a challenge, a confrontation of two artistic thinkings, which could eventually fit into a form of a gallery tour. A gesture first of all for ourselves, not primarily for the public."²² Postponing the delivery of a catalogue, changing the location of the exhibition from one city to another, and hiding the ideas behind objects which just hint at them, *General Reminder* perfectly realized the intention of its authors. The paradox of this exhibition is that it exploits public memory to unify separated ideas, but at the same time, it illuminates the public's traditional activity of evaluating, interpreting, and criticizing. Nevertheless, the ability of the public to criticize is limited because the artists

deliberately did not give the viewer all necessary information about the project. Thus, s/he cannot evaluate and interpret. Being totally confused, s/he ceases to be an active perceiver and meaning-maker and becomes a part of the project itself, a social being recalling his/her past in an effort to make sense of what s/he sees at the exhibition. Public memory, which comes to be actualized through the viewer's interpretative efforts, functions as a "catalyst." Un-understanding becomes a part of the meaning-making, though the subject of understanding remains un-defined. Some meaning is being produced in the *General Reminder*, we just do not know who owns it.

Leiderman claims that "we keep our project as a new kind of exhibition that leads somewhere outside of existing paradigms."²³ The public which *General Reminder* tries to tackle exists as an element of the museum institution. Thus, the project is defined by and possible only within the gallery space, which transforms a passerby into a spectator. This transformation asks the viewer to make sense of what s/he sees and to think that sense is somewhere in there to be found. Opposing themselves to the gallery organization and the public, the artists use this opposition as a part of their project. They develop the historical theme by means of their own methods and seek ways to involve visitors in their contemplation of the subject of public memory and cultural history.

¹ Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 404.

² +2000/-2000, *Even: An Installation at the End of the Millenium by Osvaldo Romberg*, catalogue (New York: a +2000/-2000, Even Publication, 1996), 25.

³ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹² *Ibid.*, 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁴ The concept “catalysis” appeared in the course of preparing the exhibition catalogue, which exists as an edited correspondence between Sugár and Leiderman and includes the notes and questions of the editor, Geneva Anderson. By using a chemical metaphor for aesthetic phenomena, Leiderman explains what he regards as the crucial difference between “mechanism” and “apparatuses.” “For me,” he writes, “apparatuses don’t have commonly held associations to industrial machines, they are just structures or events which are affected by the influence of more than one force. And these forces can have different natures which are alien to each other.” János Sugár and Yuri Leiderman, *General Reminder* (Budapest: the Ludwig Museum Budapest, 1999), 9. Each of Leiderman’s objects in *General Reminder* is such an apparatus, and the speed of their work (the production of meaning) depends on different cultural catalyses inserted by the artist himself or by a viewer.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶ János Sugár and Yuri Leiderman, *General Reminder* (Budapest: the Ludwig Museum Budapest, 1999), 7.

¹⁷ Anna Kharkina, “Email interview with Yuri Leiderman.” E-mail correspondence, Budapest, Hungary, January 13, 2002.

¹⁸ János Sugár and Yuri Leiderman, *General Reminder* (Budapest: the Ludwig Museum Budapest, 1999), 17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

²¹ For example, Leiderman’s *Electrons’ Names* object echoes the electrical lamps installed instead of one leg of a table in Sugár’s installation *The Breakfast of Logos*, or Leiderman’s *Skaldic Kennings* pictures, which display the idea of the “proto-boom of the universe right after the Big Bang” (*ibid.*, 5), which refers to Sugár’s contemplation of the beginning of the four-dimensional world after the Big Bang, visualized in his *Practical Transparency*.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 18.