# Marine Hugonnier

**ART FOR MODERN ARCHITECTURE: FALL OF COMMUNISM (FEBRUARY 1986–JUNE 1994), 2018**
RUSSIA, ESTONIA, POLAND, HUNGARY, LITHUANIA, EAST GERMANY, WEST GERMANY, BULGARIA,
CZECHOSLOVAKIA, ROMANIA, UKRAINE, BELARUS
SILKSCREENED PAPER ATTACHED TO FRONT PAGES OF VINTAGE NEWSPAPERS
SEVENTY-NINE FRAMES
VARIOUS DIMENSIONS

Marine Hugonnier's "Art for Modern Architecture" (2008–) is a series of collages on vintage newspapers where silkscreened colored blocks cover all images on the front pages. The colors are taken from the Standard Kodak Color Chart. This principle of "coverage" investigates the reality of the viewer's memory, whether it is a cultural memory, a collective consciousness, or an imaginary landscape. The series features historical events from around the world spanning from the end of World War II to this day. It often crosses the narratives of the same historical event, seen from different cultural points of view, in order to reveal the working of geopolitics and the different interpretations of the same reality. This project constitutes a crossnarrative study for cinematic projects and film scripts.

*Art for Modern Architecture: Fall of Communism (February 1986–June 1994)* engages with the dissolution of the political and ideological space commonly referred to as the Eastern bloc. The assemblage of vintage cover pages of newspapers from each of the bloc-affiliated countries, reporting key events which acted as the engine of disintegration, redraws the entangled storylines connecting the 27th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (February 25, 1986) to the election of president Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus in 1994. In Hugonnier's visual archive the iconic images of these official reportages are being covered by colored silkscreens, undermining their state-sanctioned interests. The archival documents of histography thus become a contested space, voided of their representational function and reactivated by the viewers' own polyvalent individual memories connected to the past and concealed behind the patches.

Commissioned by Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary.

BORN IN PARIS, FRANCE, IN 1969.
LIVES IN LONDON, UK.

The newspaper. What was it? Let's review.▬▬▬▬▬In a basic way, the "news," presented on large-format sheets of paper, and distributed (through various commercial channels) to a literate citizenry, *constituted the "nation" in its modern form.* Which is to say, newspapers were the primary "paper technology" of nationalism, and the salient mechanism by which large numbers of people who didn't know each other at all (and arguably possessed *wildly* divergent interests) came to conceive themselves as sharing: 1) a meaningful political community at the geographical scale of, say, "France"; and, 2) a personal identity (e.g., "French") to go along with it. The reading of the daily newspaper—that paradigmatic morning/evening ritual of bourgeois modernity—can thus be understood as nothing less than the coordinated liturgy of the mass societies that arose in the wake of the collapse of the Ancien Régime(s).▬▬▬▬▬The theorist most closely associated with this account of the relationship between newspapers and global social order across the "long nineteenth century" (so long that it is still kind of only ending in our lifetimes) is Benedict Anderson, author of the go-to critical reference on the cultural forms of nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (1983). There, Anderson introduced the notion of "print capitalism" as an essential element in the formation of modern political/social life. A convergence of industrial-scale publishing entrepreneurship and broadening democratic literacy, print capitalism standardized national languages, commercialized political engagement, and conjured the conceptual space where a "nation" could live in the minds of those who composed it. The wide-circulating daily newspaper was the greatest achievement of the print capitalists. It created, for them, stupendous private fortunes, and it put in place the central dramaturgy of political modernity: there were agential actors and consequential events held before all on a (physically unseen, only *imagined*) stage with many wings; the "people," together, synchronized in time, beheld these dramas as spectators, but also saw themselves, as in classical theater, figured within the action as a kind of chorus; the affective coordination of the populace, thusly entertained and informed, found very real-world issue in the mass mobilizations of the largest armies the world has ever known—which promptly fought wars of unprecedented scale.▬▬▬▬▬All of this is quite over. Not the wars, of course. We still have those. But we don't really have "newspapers" in the sense sketched above. The fact that the *New York Times* print-edition mostly advertises adult diapers and hearing aids is a hint-and-a-half that "print capitalism" is fighting for a vanishing sliver of octogenarians who still want paper newspapers. In lieu of that old complex, we now have "media companies." Like their print-capitalist forebears, these too are enormously concerned to make money by moving information around.

But their business models are very different. Among other things, their revenues are now wholly driven by advertising and the data associated therewith—which together have become the dominant dematerialized industry of late capitalism. It amounts to the slicing, dicing, and pricing of human attention. While by no means unknown across the history of print (advertising as the means of making money while selling a paper product for less than the cost of its production dates to the early nineteenth century, and is constitutive of the "newspaper" as such), advertising has become an enterprise of such complexity and power that to compare its twenty-first-century form with the its nineteenth-century antecedents is tantamount to comparing the piecework lace-craft of seventeenth-century Dutch needleworkers to the satanic mills of Lancashire. The change from print capitalism to media conglomerates, a change inextricable from the rise of highly labile and "personalized" communication technologies, has given us radically segmented, siloed, and sensationalized news-ecologies—with corresponding changes in our polities that we are only beginning to understand. Notably (though correlation does not imply causation), old-style "nation-states" seem rather an embattled proposition these days, threatened equally by the unprecedented mobility of goods and populations *and* by the defensive atavisms engendered by the collapse of older and more stable forms. Our wars have changed too. Pretty much nobody is massing hundreds of thousands of footsoldiers (galvanized, say, by yellow journalism in the popular press) and sending them to "the front"; our conflicts have become as cellular and surgical and mercurial and click-baity as our newsfeeds. Both have become suckholes of high-stakes data and pornographic horror.

With all this in mind, let's turn to Marine Hugonnier's *Art for Modern Architecture: Fall of Communism (February 1986–June 1994).* The piece presents seventy-nine front pages of European newspapers drawn from the date range of the title, all of which report events germane to the transformation of the Eastern Bloc nations across the waning years of the Soviet Empire, the collapse of the reunification of Germany, and the early phases of the expansions of both NATO and the European Union. The spaces on these front pages where one would expect (on the basis of a readerly familiarity with standard newspaper layouts) to find images display, instead, variously sized and colored collage-style paper rectangles. The general configuration of the individually framed elements of the work places in evidence the fact that chromatic sequencing (by column, by row) is a controlled element of the piece as a whole: only a single hue is used on any one page; pages placed together tend to show collage interventions of the same hue.▬▬▬▬▬An encounter with this piece is enriched by a bit of context concerning the series of which it is a part. Hugonnier has been doing works more or less like this

since 2005 under the rubric "Art for Modern Architecture." From 2005 to 2009 the works in this series, all of which displayed newspaper front-pages with collage elements over the photographs, consistently drew their collage components from the polychrome visual material in Ellsworth Kelly's 1951 volume *Line, Form, Color*. From 2009 to 2018, the date of the present work, monochrome collage blocks of paper silkscreened in a circumscribed range of color-chart hues have replaced the Kelly cutouts of the earlier works in the series. So what can be said about all of this?

In the first place, it feels necessary to address the facially didactic (but at the same time not immediately obvious) import of the series title: "Art for Modern Architecture." Collaged newspapers have played a role in the work of many artists over the last century, from Braques to Pinterest (via Schwitters and lots of other folks), but architecture doesn't seem especially salient in that lineage. The link would seem to be through Kelly himself, whose ideas about the need for art engaged with, and responsive to, the spaces created by architectural modernity Hugonnier appears to have wanted to resurface. In a thoughtful article published in 1995, the art historian Michael Plante built a strong case that Kelly's work of the 1950s was overwhelmingly concerned with the muralist traditions of post-war Europe.[1] Reading Kelly's Paris years, from 1948 to 1954, against the French revival of (left, progressive, even communist, and anyway reconstruction-oriented) murals, and drawing on Kelly's period archives, Plante demonstrates Kelly's preoccupation with escaping the bounded quadrature of the wall-hung, drawing-room-scale stretched canvas. Kelly was clear enough in a letter to John Cage in 1950: "I am not interested in painting as it has been accepted for so long—to hang on the walls of houses as pictures. To hell with pictures—they should be the wall."[2] And he was still pushing the point after the publication of *Line, Form, Color*, when he summed up his position in a letter to Hilla Rebay, doyenne of the emergent Guggenheim Museum: "I have decided against the policy of exhibiting. . . . And I don't believe in selling pictures. That's all a hangover from the Renaissance. The future artist must work directly with society. I believe that the days of the 'easel' painting are fading, and that the future art will be something more than just 'personality paintings' for walls of apartments and museums. The future art must go to the wall itself. And this is what I have been trying to do in my work."[3] Social and architectural engagement are here made explicitly conjoint—and paramount. For Plante, Kelly can be seen to pursue this program in the large-scale multiple-panel works of the later 1950s, and Plante is primarily concerned with the implications of his archival finds for the proper placement of Kelly in the topography of Expressionism, Color Field painting, and Minimalism. Matisse looms, and the art of corporate lobbies feels rather like the place most of the relevant work eventually ends up—a fitting

mausoleum, perhaps, for pieces that, after reading Plante (though this is not his point), we are tempted to think of as inbred descendants of the radical, social-visionary work of Malevich and various Marxist muralists. Plante doesn't even mention *Line, Form, Color*, but Hugonnier's "Art for Modern Architecture" series could be taken—at least the early works, which reprise Kelly directly—to be forwarding an explicit argument that it is that book, not the muralist multi-panel works, that are the proper realization of Kelly's program to abandon the fetish-object of the framed canvas. But we still have some thinking to do. Since the point could be that print culture (the printing of the art book; the structures of dissemination implicit in the machinations of print capitalism) created the "spaces"—i.e., the "architecture"—to which Kelly's vision aspired. Or the point could be that it is to these spaces that his vision *should have* aspired. That's surely too reductive. Presumably none of the pieces in the "Art for Modern Architecture" series should be understood as a mere "proposition." But when we confront newspaper-artifacts, hung framed on a wall, and adorned/obscured by Kelly images, it is reasonable to find ourselves puzzling along the lines I sketch in the paragraphs above. We may be seeing Kelly's work doing what Hugonnier takes Kelly's work to have wanted to do (escape "personality painting"). Or we may be seeing Kelly's work being shown to have recapitulated precisely the programs that he apparently sought to step past (because he failed to see that his flight from that sort of painting could lead directly to another ecology of "personality" imagery). And, whatever else is going on, this problematic looms palpably over Hugonnier's series.[4]

But by the *Fall of Communism (February 1986–June 1994)*, which is to say by 2018, Kelly himself had become in any case an absent presence. His actual graphic elements are gone, and cited only in the conceptual residue that inheres in the series *qua* series. They have been displaced by bits of Color Field, or by bits of monochromatic Minimalism, or by a version of the *gouaches decoupées* associated with Matisse (but in exactly the "ready made" colors Yve-Alain Bois identified as characteristically Kelly's). Whichever of those genealogies we choose to privilege, we are evidently a full step away from direct citation of Kelly. So let's look again. And let's *juxtapose*. One cannot but be struck by the contrapuntal torque of setting Hugonnier's *Fall of Communism (February 1986–June 1994)* next to Sarah Charlesworth's *April 21, 1978* (1978), one of the works from her "Modern History" series. This piece, like others in that series, was the product of what Charlesworth called "unwriting," a process of textual erasure, of *excription*, that leaves the viewer with work that feels like the formal conjugate of Hugonnier's: in Charlesworth, we have a set of 45 framed front pages of various global newspapers (all from the same

date), in which *all of the text below the masthead has been blanked out*, leaving, for our perusal, a spotty thread of news-photos—but no text. The images allow us a "snapshot" of the stuttering and repetitious news-cycle of the day, which centered on the release of a ransom photo of Aldo Moro (the former Italian Prime Minister) by the Italian Red Brigade.＿＿＿＿＿For all the formal consonance of their works, the Hugonnier and the Charlesworth are not perfectly reciprocating: the Charlesworth is made of low-quality photostat reproductions, and this forcefully heightens relic-materiality of actual archival pages in the Hugonnier; the Hugonnier is diachronic and chromatic, against the Charlesworth's synchronic specificity and high-contrast, microfiche-like black and white. But we are presented, in these works, with coordinating efforts to activate "the news" as a visual/textual/temporal nexus—one that is constitutive of our socio-political reality, and that is best "seen" *through disruptive interventions of erasure and displacement*.＿＿＿＿＿This feels important.

But we aren't finished. Though in a larger sense we may be doomed. ＿＿＿＿＿Which is a way of saying: there's more to say about *Fall of Communism (February 1986–June 1994),* even as what we are talking about here (the changing cycles of news; the political communities and individual identities engendered by these dynamics) touches on matters that I think should be the source of great anxiety as we face the future.＿＿＿＿＿Let's stay with the Hugonnier for another moment, since we wouldn't want to overlook that her piece has at its center, of course, a *wall*—the Berlin wall, the fall of which can be understood as a metonymy for the eponymous "Fall of Communism." And that brings us back to Kelly, and his various plaintive muralisms. Art must "*go to the wall,*" he cried; painting must "*be the wall,*" he announced, rattling his spear.＿＿＿＿＿Yes. Indeed.＿＿＿＿＿And we are again in an era of walls. In Palestine. In Texas. And these are walls that are being made from our new, mediated cycles of news every bit as much as they are being made from poured concrete slabs and corten steel.  Should we understand the series "Art for Modern Architecture" to be "about" such walls and their relationship to the information ecology of late modernity?＿＿＿＿＿ I cannot see how one could answer no.＿＿＿＿＿"Art must go to the wall," wrote Kelly in 1952.  And, rightly understood, the proposition retains uncanny force.＿＿＿＿＿And we might hazard that news must go back to the wall as well. After all, the start of the newspaper lies in the single-sided, single-page printed leaf known as a *broadsheet*. These, of course, were *posted on walls*, and read by those who gathered before them. In this sense, before the museum or secular picture gallery had become an established feature of modern life, people gathered before a kind of wall-hung quadrature of image-text-news and *regarded it together,*  much as we gather now before a

work like *Fall of Communism (February 1986–June 1994).*＿＿＿＿＿ In this sense, Hugonnier can be understood as endeavoring to "gather us" in a new way before the stuff of our shared social and political reality. In the face of the emerging conditions of radical fragmentation, of a hypercapitalistic fracking of both subjectivity and social life, WE NEED THIS.

1   Michael Plante, "'Things to Cover Walls': Ellsworth Kelly's Paris Paintings and the Tradition of Mural Decoration," *American Art* 9:1 (Spring 1995): 36–53.

2   Kelly to John Cage, 4 September 1950, cited in Plante.

3   Kelly to Rebay, 29 November 1952 (?), cited in Plante.

4   While working on this essay I got interested in the relationship between Hugonnier's "Art for Modern Architecture" series and the publication by the German daily *Die Welt* of a special "Ellsworth Kelly" edition on October 6, 2011. It was the second special edition in an ongoing series promoted by that publication, which has now expanded to include a remarkable slate of prominent artists (Baselitz, Koons, Richter, etc.). It works like this: each artist is given creative control over the visual material of the newspaper on one day, thereby generating various queerings of the reader's expectations (an article on Premier League football, "illustrated" by a Cindy Sherman photograph?).

The Ellsworth Kelly edition is an *uncanny simulacrum* of Hugonnier's early works in the "Art for Modern Architecture" series. Yes, art emulates life. But then, as we know, life, having eaten a little art, experiences various prionic deformations in its central nervous system and, like cows suffering from BSE, goes a little mad—"becoming" some version of what it has tasted, as its building blocks are twisted into little twins of the invading particles. But is it always feigned, this little shiver of Dionysian disruption? Maybe. After all, most of the information I could find online about the *Die Welt* artists editions turned up in a weird series of case-study posts on the website of what seemed to be an advertising and marketing consultancy, which was keen to highlight the strong branding results and sales bumps occasioned by *Die Welt* as they have built out their artist edition series. A copy of the Ellsworth Kelly edition is available online at the time of my writing for $175. Which is about a 125% increase in value in eight years. Not bad.

This sort of thing was once called the "commodification of dissent," but with the addition of the recursive layers of *meta* that characterize our moment, I think this would perhaps count as something like the "commodification of the commodification of dissent." Or maybe we need another "dissent" in there?

MARINE HUGONNIER, **ART FOR MODERN ARCHITECTURE: FALL OF COMMUNISM (FEBRUARY 1986–JUNE 1994),** 2018, DETAIL