

AN ANTHOLOGY  
OF ART CRITICISM

# BRIDGING THE GAPS

IN CENTRAL AND  
EASTERN EUROPE  
AFTER 1989

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# INTRODUCTION

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**ART  
CRITICISM  
IN CENTRAL  
AND  
EASTERN  
EUROPE  
AFTER 1989**

**ROUND TABLE  
DISCUSSION  
OF ART CRITICS  
FROM  
AICA POLAND,  
AICA HUNGARY,  
AICA SLOVAKIA**

Arkadiusz Półtorak: Good afternoon. First, I would like to express my gratitude to Małgorzata Kaźmierczak—the vice president of AICA International and AICA Poland—who took the lead in organizing this event. We have gathered here to discuss the anchor themes and the scope of the upcoming anthology of critical texts written in Central and Eastern European countries after 1989. Thanks to the generous support of the international Visegrád Fund and AICA International, the publication project is currently unfolding at a quick pace. Significantly, this initiative would not have happened without the selfless engagement of many people, including Małgorzata Kaźmierczak herself—who acts as the project coordinator—but also the presidents of the Czech, Hungarian, Slovakian, and Polish sections of AICA International: Hana Lavrová, Attila Horányi, Lýdia Pribišová and Magdalena Ujma. It also certainly would not have happened without the tremendous support from critics and curators who volunteered to take part in the steering committee, including Vlasta Noshirova from the Czech Republic, Katalin Balázs, Áron Fenyvesi and Julius Hutt from Hungary and our Slovakian colleagues Jana Geržová and Maria Hlavajova. A huge thanks is due to all of you for the groundbreaking work of popularizing, situating, reframing, and opening the critical discourse in Visegrád countries after 1989.

It might be somewhat ironic that the role of today's chair was assigned to me, a critic who was born shortly after the revolutionary year of 1989, whose memory of the economic and cultural transformation is rather blurry, and who could hardly act as an expert in the matters we will be discussing today. However, I consider my role not only ironic but also, to a certain extent, symbolic. The aim of the publication is not only to represent the development of critical discourse in Central and Eastern Europe within the last 30 years, but also to engage with the discussions that are being held in the global art world right now. We hope to present possible perspectives for re-reading the local traditions in art criticism, considering the key issues or urgencies of the present, such as colonialism and decolonization, extractive capitalism or identity politics.

Now, please let me introduce today's panelists. We have invited the Hungarian critic and researcher Attila Horányi, who is the director of the Institute for Theoretical Studies at Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design. He holds an MA in art history and a PhD in aesthetics, both from Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. Attila Horányi was a Fulbright Scholar at the Cultural Anthropology Department at Northwestern University and currently serves as the president of the Hungarian section of AICA International. From Poland comes Dorota Monkiewicz, who has been an art historian, curator, and art critic for nearly two decades. She worked as a curator of modern and contemporary art at the National Museum in Warsaw from 1990 to 2009. She was also working on the programming committee of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and, since March 2009, she was leading the project of founding a new Museum of Contemporary Art in Wrocław. From 2011 to 2016, she served as the founding director of the institution. She was also the president of the Polish Section of AICA. And, last but not least, I would like to welcome Jana Geržová, a Slovakian art historian, critic, and editor-in-chief of the magazine *Profil*. Before 1989, she cooperated with several artists in the unofficial scene in Slovakia, and after the year of the breakthrough, she co-founded the art magazine *Profil*. Since 1992, she has been acting as its editor-in-chief. She was the president of the Slovak section of AICA between 2000 and 2007 and worked at the Academy of Fine Arts at the Institute of Arts and Sciences.

My very first question pertains to the overall structure of the upcoming anthology. With all likelihood, it will be roughly divided into nine themes: 1. The Representation of the Economic, Political, and Cultural Transition After 1989, 2. Gender and Body, 3. Feminism, 4. Otherness and the Politics of Identities, 5. Institutional Critique, 6. Political Art and Censorship, 7. Art and Public Spaces, 8. Critique of Critique, 9. Perspectives on pre-1989 art. My question would be, which of these themes do you deem most important, or simply most relevant, from the viewpoint of your respective countries? In other words, which of those themes corresponds most directly to the dominant conventions, positions, or themes in post-1989 critical writing on art and culture in your respective countries?

DM: I was thinking about the questions you sent us beforehand. They really brought me to analyze what happened, when, and how this critical debate was developing in Poland. And, in fact, your first question is a historical one—because the significant subjects have changed since 1989. From my perspective, in Poland, some of the subject matters you listed overlap each other, but in general, I would say that directly after 1989, political art and censorship were the most important matters. They were connected with the matters of the body and otherness. Then, the next point I listed in my notes was the art of women. In 1996, there was the first edition of the exhibition *A Woman About a Woman* in Bielsko-Biała, and I recall the exhibition as the beginning of the serious discussion of this subject. The first texts appeared earlier in the 1990s, but since this exhibition onward, the debate has gotten stronger. It was very strange because we had a strong public debate focusing on the new regulations regarding abortion; however, that debate was not that present in art and art criticism in the 1990s. Later on, this was even turned into an argument against female art critics and criticism in general; that they did not follow this case in the 1990s closely enough.

The next step was the debate on the economy of art, and this I connect with the founding of the *Krytyka Polityczna* magazine, which happened in 2002. In 2004, Artur Żmijewski, an artist engaged in critical art, joined the team of *Krytyka Polityczna* as a graphic designer. It was also the moment when the Wyspa Art Institute in Gdańsk started its activities, and it was there that a crucial encounter occurred between the authors of *Krytyka Polityczna*, who were leftist political writers and columnists, and the artists and art critics in Gdańsk. It happened in 2004, at the conference that was held during the opening of the exhibition entitled *BHP* [Health and safety regulations], which touched on the defeat of the members of the Solidarity movement in the context of the capitalist transformation.

The next dominant subject would be institutional critique, and I would place the peak of interest in this matter in 2013 and 2014, coinciding with the Winter Holiday Camp in the Center of Contemporary Art in Warsaw. This is how I see the sequence of urgent subject matters in art criticism after 1989.

AP: It seems like you skipped over much of the 1990s...

DM: I published an article in the book edited by Zbigniew Libera (*Art of Liberation. A Press Study 1988-1997*), so I would rather not repeat myself. What happened in the 1990s is already widely discussed, but the later developments have yet to be set up, and this really interests me for this discussion and this panel. Of course, I can give a general account of the 1990s. We had two sources for art criticism: one was the criticism connected with the *Zeszyty Literackie* magazine, which was a dissident magazine published abroad and connected with the older generation of art critics. They were representing art criticism deriving from literary criticism and turned out to be the very conservative critics, dedicated to figurative painting and other traditional media like sculpture and graphics. After 1989, but not immediately after 1989, maybe 1993–94, there emerged a new generation of art critics, who were very aware of new media, and installations. For the most part, they were the voices of their time, of the very hard time of transformation in Poland. They were involved in the art field's development, and as Piotr Piotrowski used to say, "they were involved in creating a new language" to write about art. And they were also involved in the cultural war that we saw happening in Poland in the 1990s.

AP: Was the situation similar in Slovakia?

JG: Yes, and also no. I would like to stay with the issue of representation of the transition period. This topic found its space in an anthology for the first time, and it is essential. It is a theme common to almost all post-totalitarian countries, which—in their reception of the collapse of the Soviet Empire—have passed from euphoria to disappointment, as the economic transformation was associated with predatory capitalism, including wild privatization, political corruption, and the naive notion that the free market is the only key to prosperity. There were even voices saying that only art that sells well will survive. I would like to stress that the interpretation of the transition is still an open process, and this is also illustrated by the critical writing that we propose in the anthology. While the critics and artists of my generation have been deeply immersed in the reality of the 1990s, over time, critical reflection began to emerge. The question is whether this growing criticism stems from a change of judgement across generations, or is it related to the current economic, political, and environmental crises. The last exhibition that mapped the period of transition was in Bratislava this year. The curators were very critical of transition; they even questioned the Western economic and political model, and they were very critical of my own generation for not being able to seek our path independently of the West. These curators belong to the generation that has not experienced the enthusiasm for freedom that we gained after the fall of the Iron Curtain—the

enthusiasm that helped our generation overcome the negatives of transition. Can it also be the reason for our growing frustration with the world we live in? This is a question to consider. They probably believe that our decision, made in 1989, has resulted in the current crisis. The pressing point is whether we should have done it differently—and how. Do we have the answers? And did the curators of the exhibition have them? Maybe it is a question for all of us.

The second topic is the reflection on gender, body, feminism, and otherness; on identities. In our selection for the anthology, we map the whole spectrum of problems, such as gender inequality, violence against women, the advocacy of the LGBTQIA+ community, including activist protests. These protests again repeated when the ban on abortion was being discussed or when the Istanbul Convention was rejected by the Slovak Parliament. I would like to emphasize that feminism is not the mainstream of art in Slovakia, and in the 1990s it was misunderstood and rejected. But the feminist discourse has significantly changed the minds of many artists, and through their subsequent work, many visitors of the exhibitions. Also, many examples of institutional critique are directly associated with feminism. I would like to mention only one exhibition, which was entitled *Nudes. Uncensored Works by Modern Masters* in the Slovak National Gallery in 2010. The ambition of the three female curators was to look at the female nudes of prominent Slovak modern and late modern artists through the lens of feminist criticism. The exhibition provoked a stormy reaction, mainly because the women—the objects of the male erotic fantasy—became subjects that showed a crooked mirror to the male genius. Finally, the third area I want to pay attention to is political art and censorship. The situation in Slovakia was very complicated during the 1990s because Vladimír Mečiar came to power between 1993 and 1998, and this period was marked by a return to authoritarian rule with all the negative signs – including the kidnapping of the president's son managed by the Slovak Information Service. For art, this meant suppressing a plurality of artistic views. National culture became the ideal, and experimental art was again suppressed as unacceptable cosmopolitan formalism. At that time, critical writing was replaced by artistic and political activism. We together organized protests against the manipulation of public finance dedicated to culture, the political dismissal of the director of the most successful galleries, and the non-respect of tenders, e.g., selection for the Czech and Slovak Pavilions in Venice. This resulted in a big public protest in 1995 against the concept of Slovak culture, which was signed by thousands of Slovak intellectuals. And I must add that those who signed this protest risked losing their job or otherwise being punished. The period was ex post mapped by an exhibition prepared in 2014 by a team of young curators and people called *Paradox 90. Curatorial Concepts During Mečiarism (1993–1998)*.



Although I chose these three thematic eras, this does not mean that others didn't find a response in Slovakia. I will also return to them through topics such as the dichotomy of West versus East or phenomena such as colonization, self-colonization, and decolonization, which we will discuss later.

**AP:** Attila, how does it look from the Hungarian perspective?

**AH:** It looks complicated, and I'm not really going to go through many details about the last 30 years of our country's history because it would be very difficult and not very effective in terms of understanding how art criticism functions in these decades. In fact, my colleagues here, who are editing our contribution to this volume, decided to focus on the 1990s. To understand what was happening at the very early phase of this more liberated, freer period of our country or of our region. I'm going to concentrate on that. When I was looking through your questions and the possibilities of what type of art criticism stands out and what subject matter is perhaps the most important in this period, I decided that it is probably the institutional critique, and I will try to explain why this is so. It does not mean that there were no other voices at the time; there were some, but perhaps not that many. And I think the reason for this is the following: art criticism was not a profession that was taught at any universities, or anywhere else. It was art historians – whose methods inherited from before 1989 were perhaps a bit too formal and explanatory – who attempted to provide an account of the changes in the 1990s. They were trying to explain what was going on. At one point, one of the best art critics and art historians of the period of the avant-garde, László Beke, explained to me that in the 1970s and 1980s, writing a bad review meant that you were reporting to the officials. It was, in a sense, inappropriate. So, either you were silent about bad art, or bad exhibitions, or you were writing positively, and that remained with us until the fall of the Berlin Wall and later.

Theoretical approaches related to feminism, critique of nationalism and other contemporary perspectives, were not widespread after the Berlin Wall fell because most people were educated before 1989. Therefore, what critics were trying to focus on was the appearance of new institutions that were markedly different from old galleries and so on. One of the more important things in this country and the whole region was, in fact, the appearance in the 1980s of the Soros Foundation and Center for Culture and Communication, which were mighty and dynamic in organizing exhibitions. Also, Pro Helvetia helped to fund an association of non-profit organizations and galleries like Studio Gallery that was connected to the Young Artists Association. Or to Óbudai Társaskör Gallery, or Ligand Gallery and other smaller venues that were markedly different from the larger institutions like Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle and the National Gallery. Their production mode was markedly different. This created a gap between

the big institutions and the smaller ones. The smaller institutions created an institutional critique that was directed against these larger institutions and the powers behind them. I'd say this is one part of the story. The other part of the story is that conceptual art was strong in Hungary in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, and this conceptual art implied a conceptual thinking about art—and about artistic institutions—which also led to institutional critique. That thinking surfaced both in art, and in art criticism.

An important exhibition in 1993 was *Polyphony: Social Commentary in Contemporary Hungarian Art*, which spoke on social issues, and used public space as a medium for art. This was one of the first big events that the Soros Foundation organized with Barnabás Bencsik, who ran the Studio Gallery—the exhibition venue of the Studio of Young Artists Association. Through that intervention, he questioned the methods and ways in which the larger institutions work. This was translated into institutional critique. Actually, most of our important actors at the time were trying to address this problem, and this is what characterized the 1990s. Although... I should mention that there was one important exhibition, *Water Ordeal*, in 1995, which was a markedly feminist intervention at the Óbudai Társaskör Gallery. So, other types of voices also appeared, but it was largely trying to reflect on what was happening in the 1970s and 1980s – both in art institutions and art criticism.

AP: Interesting. After 1989, Poland inherited a pretty well-developed institutional system from the times of the Socialist Republic, which in turn was decentralized and altered. At least to a certain extent. The formal identity of the inherited institutions changed, but some of them—especially the smaller, local public galleries—remained attached to their past. Others have moved with the times... It would be worthwhile exploring what factors dictated the different approaches.

Attila's statement brings me to the next question. As mentioned in the beginning, the last chapter of the anthology will address the contemporary perspectives on the pre-1989 art in Central and Eastern European countries. Let's try to attend to how the shift has been conceptualized within the sociocultural imagination that art critics not only reflect, but also co-create. Has the experience of the transition been described in your respective countries of origin as a radical break—or rather, has it been perceived as an evolution, a kind of smooth transition?

DM: It is a very difficult question. First, I would like to come back to what I said before in light of Attila and Jana's remarks on the interest in conceptual art in Hungary and Slovakia, as well as in the institutional critique. I understand that the joy of freedom in Slovakia had a big impact. In Poland, it was a big thing too; however... While it was very much felt within the Polish society at large, it was hardly expressed in art and art criticism. I have to say, it is already quite obvious and banal in Polish discussions that whatever was important after 1989 happened under the sign of Michel Foucault and Jolanta Brach-Czaina—the two writers that exerted a huge influence on the art scene. The meaning of

the body was very much politicized in the 1990s, and this political impulse was stemming not only from the ongoing situation but also from a need to reflect on the previous communist period in the given context.

Directly after 1989, it was also important to show all the underground activities that were held in the 1980s, so there was a whole series of exhibitions at Zachęta Art Gallery showing the underground art or, if you will, the art beyond censorship. There were numerous unofficial initiatives in the 1980s, and a whole sequence of surveys of certain galleries, people, artists, and movements unfolded throughout 1990 and 1991, for two years. However, the only important exhibition that referenced the previous “official” art scene, was the exhibition curated by Ryszard Ziarkiewicz at CCA Zamek Ujazdowski in 1990 (*Paradise Lost. Polish Art in 1949 and 1989*), which tried to somehow conceptualize the experience of social realism and, in general, art influenced by communism. We had a discussion before, in the 1980s, about the 1950s and 1960s and the official cultural politics of the communist state. So, this was not such a hot topic in the 1990s, especially since an important book by Wojciech Włodarczyk was published in the 1980s (*Socrealizm. Sztuka polska w latach 1950-1954* [Socrealism. Polish Art 1950-1954]) and immediately instigated a discussion in the circle of the Society of Art Historians. A new attitude toward the communist past in art and in art criticism emerged after 2000, when Marxist theory gained a new recognition among the younger generation of artists and theoreticians. The founding of *Krytyka Polityczna* magazine was a clear sign that the history comes back; however, not as a negative example, but as the subject of revision.

JG: I must say that in Slovakia there was a radical break, but there were also many problems. First, it was necessary to revise the Slovak art history of the 20th century. This meant not only interpreting the artists of the so-called unofficial scene, but also a critical reading of the past, especially the period of orthodox social realism in the 1950s and the soft form of social realism in the 1970s. It was a long process that resulted in the exhibition and publication entitled *The 20th Century History of Slovak Fine Art* within the conceptual framework of Zora Rusinová, which took place in 2000. More than 10 years after the revolutionary changes in the Slovak National Gallery—but in this context, I would like to draw attention to one specific problem. Perhaps we should elaborate on a new phenomenon that came into discussion at the end of the 1990s, which we can call self-colonization. The debate was opened by the Bulgarian theorist Alexander Kiossev with the text *Notes on the Self-colonizing Cultures*, which was published in the catalog of the exhibition *After the Wall* in 1999. His theory is based on the premise that, unlike violent historical overseas colonization, self-colonizing cultures are those that “adopt foreign [Western] values and civilization models themselves and, through

this foreign model, colonize their own authenticity and do so with love.” In 2008, we opened a discussion on this topic in our magazine *Profil*. All participants agreed that if we accept Alexander Kiossev’s theory, we will accept the fact that we belong to the non-Western cultures. However, our history illustrates that we are part of Western history, at least since Romanesque art. What is important is that, while we do not belong to the culture of power, we are not the “exotic” others. But in Slovakia, there are younger generations and some colleagues, who think that we have adopted Western modernity unwittingly and suppressed our authenticity. They are talking about Westernization. This is an issue that needs to be discussed. In this context, an important question arises: what is our authenticity? Is it folklore? I will attempt to address this issue with the example of Maria Bartusová, today one of the most respected European artists, who was born and studied in Prague, Czech Republic, but lived for her whole life in eastern Slovakia, in Košice. After documenta 12 in 2007, where her works were presented, she became one of the most important European artists. Her oeuvre was also showcased at the Venice Biennale in 2022. I would like to point out that her work does not exist in a vacuum. It can be read in the context of Western art history, and yet it is very original. Similar examples include the abstract painting of Ester Šimerová-Martinčková, who studied in Paris at the Académie Julian. In the 1930s, she later became a private student and friend of Alexandra Exter, one of the avant-garde Russian artists, who lived in Paris. And what is important from my perspective is that this art does not mechanically accept the language of Western tendencies; she didn’t accept it as a finished form; she participated in its transformation.

AP: I believe that in Poland, a reflection on self-colonisation was already developing in the 1990s as a “hidden undercurrent” in local art and criticism... So, way before the language of coloniality became an integral part of the lexicon of art and criticism some dozen years ago, perhaps around 2010. However, Dorota Monkiewicz might disagree [laughter].

DM: I would like to stress that we didn’t use the word colonization in those times, in the 1990s. We didn’t really know the particular meanings or use of the word—including the notion of self-colonization. However, we had these discussions about people who were not considered original artists because they mimicked what was happening in the West. This kind of argumentation was in use until around 1997 and was finally exhausted and brought into disrepute during the debate on *Lego Concentration Camp* by Zbigniew Libera. However, there was another context of this discussion about the West and the East. It was a discussion about the art market, in which works by Polish artists didn’t achieve the same prices as those by Western artists. It was a vital context, and it fueled the critical debate for quite a long time. It was also noted that the infrastructure of the art scene in Poland was much

poorer than in Germany, and the artists had no support from the state. In Poland of the 1990s, there were no galleries to support the artist's production, apart from the CCA Zamek Ujazdowski in Warsaw. There were no collectors or buyers, but on the other hand, there was no state support for the artist either. When I was making projects with German and Polish artists, the artists from Germany were getting strong financial support from various organizations in Germany, and the Polish artists had no support from the Polish side at all. Nobody supported Polish artists, so they were usually penniless in the 1990s. The discussion about the incomes of the artists became public only after 2000, but in fact, they were the poorest in the 1990s, when it was not a subject of public debate.

AP: Thank you. But let us return to the question of the perception of the breakthrough....

AH: The question was broad, and my colleagues' answers have been leading in various directions, so it is difficult to respond. Nevertheless, I'm going to try to elaborate a bit on what I was saying from a different perspective. I would like to reflect on the following topic: how we are relating to pre-1989 art, how we are understanding it, and, in a different context, how we are representing it. What I think is significant from an art criticism standpoint is that many of those artists, who were alive and working in the 1970s and 1980s, were not officially recognized as important artists. There is this conception in Hungary of the three Ss [in Hungarian: three Ts]: that there were artists who were suppressed, some artists who were supported, and some artists who were inbetween—who were “safe”, simply tolerated. There were several artists, who were suppressed and were unable to show anywhere, especially in the 1970s. A somewhat better situation arose in the 1980s, and there was a wide spectrum of artists who were tolerated in some ways, but never got the recognition that they thought they deserved. Because of their political or perhaps too formalist approach. After 1989, they thought—and perhaps with good reason—that this was their time. Most of them were in their late 1940s, perhaps 1950s and 1960s, and they thought: “Okay, this is our time; we have arrived”. But it did not prove so simple.

After 1989 it became relatively easy to look up what was being produced in Berlin, Paris, but most importantly in New York and London. Ideas coming in from elsewhere—and from younger people—reflected markedly different approaches. The new art was strongly conceptual and very different from the painterly production of most [Hungarian] artists in the 1980s and 1970s. This created a generational clash, which caused some very heated debates. One art historian and art critic wrote an important review entitled *A Message to the Masters*, which was not very well received. He was trying to convince older artists that times



had changed and space had to be freed up for younger artists, at least to some extent. Those people were pretty upset because they never had the chance to claim their own space. The situation got somewhat complicated with the appointing of László Beke as the head of Műcsarnok. Already in 1991, he curated a historical show about art of the 1960s in Hungary. This was crucial because he was not trying to show exclusively the neo-avant-garde, but all kinds of art next to each other. It refreshing in trying to explain it all in cultural, social, and natural scientific contexts, as well as in trying to say something new about the 1960s—but, again, it was criticized very heavily on various grounds. A little later on, he became the director of Műcsarnok / Kunsthalle and he based his programme on presentations of important artists from the 1960s and 1970s—basically, his friends—who had not yet had major institutional exhibitions.. And again, he met with certain disagreements, or perhaps skepticism. Some of the responses amounted to institutional critique. Most entailed questions like: is it correct to show those people? Is it appropriate to think about them in this way? The important thing here is that this was very closely related to art historical understanding and knowledge, so it was not purely subjective art criticism. The questions were, so to speak, history-specific; they addressed some sort of cultural politics—or the politics of the art field—that affects who has power and who is left without it. This was not pure art criticism; it was interrogating social history very closely.

**AP:** Since Jana brought up Bartuszoová and Dorota brought up Libera, could you name an artist or a couple of artists who would exemplify the current of formerly underground artists, who were striving to come to the fore after 1989?

**AH:** Miklós Erdély was one of the big names, and it's a very strange and ironic, but also unfortunate, that he had his exhibition at the Műcsarnok / Kunsthalle and a catalog was never produced. It is almost unbelievable, and perhaps it says something about the very strange situation of Hungarian art criticism and art history, as well as how we look at neo-avant-garde culture and what's happening in the art market. Miklós Erdély, obviously, and Tamás Szentjóby, who came back to Hungary from Switzerland in 1991 and started teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts. Dóra Maurer, who also became a professor here at my university for a very short period, should be mentioned too. In the early 1990s, she transferred to the Academy of Fine Arts and became a mentor to a wide variety of artists. She still has a forceful power and presence. In fact, she was named the most powerful person in Hungary's art scene.

**DM:** In Poland we knew all these names—like Dóra Maurer, Tamás Szentjóby or Miklós Erdély—since the late 1960s, when they were showing in our country. However, I am curious about the artists who only appeared in the limelight in the 1990s...

AH: For instance, Agnes Eperjesi and Attila Csorgó came to prominence, followed by Antal Lakner and Emese Benczúr, and I could probably name a few others... However, I would consider Agnes Eperjesi and Attila Csorgó the most important.

AP: You have all mentioned in passing that after 1989, artists from our region were quick to cast their eyes on their Western colleagues. This begs the question: has the Cold War dichotomy between the East and the West persisted in the critical discourse after 1989 in your respective countries, and if so, in what way? I know this is an extremely broad question, but maybe you could provide some topical examples of when this distinction broke in a certain way, or maybe when it resurfaced.

DM: One thing that comes to mind is a book by Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, which was translated into Polish and published in the early nineties. It was about the CIA and American politics in Europe after the war; about the Cold War and the West teaching the East about democracy. The book was written by one of the authors from the *October* magazine, and in Poland it made a huge influence on the debate about the Iron Curtain. We talked a little bit about the colonial discourse, and I mentioned that young Polish artists were accused of imitating their Western colleagues. It is important to note that these kinds of discussions were held in the daily newspapers. Guilbaut's book provided more fuel and helped some authors clarify their positions. Notably, Ewa Mikina's writings on Krzysztof Wodiczko had much to do with the question of the Iron Curtain. The exhibition *Europa, Europa: Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarde in Mittel- und Osteuropa*, curated by Ryszard Stanisławski and Christoph Brockhaus in Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle in Bonn, 1994, was also referencing the problem—and in a challenging way, as it was conceived as an answer to the famous exhibition *Westkunst* in Cologne, 1981.

AP: Today, we can see conservatives like Andrzej Biernacki taking over important institutions in Poland and invoking what they call a “sovereign” thinking about art and institutions... An approach that is meant to counteract the “non-sovereign” allegiance to the West. What is your perception of this phenomenon?

DM: I think that there is only a tiny radical minority around Andrzej Biernacki. I mean a tiny group of art critics and artists, who think in this same way. Most of the art scene does not think in these terms. There is always a margin of error in every public debate. As it happens, recently incompetent people representing strange opinions and strange attitudes towards contemporary art landed in the very center of the institutional system. However, they are in the center only thanks to the political power that backs them against the majority of the art scene. Certainly, they do not represent the center of the art scene. When I'm reading *SZUM* or *Dwutygodnik*, which are two main magazines devoted to contemporary art, I don't encounter their opinions and I don't ponder too

much about sovereignty. We have a problem with Biernacki and the ruling party, not with Western art or its institutions.

JG: I am going to return to the basic question. From the Slovakian perspective, the West versus East dichotomy is one of the key issues, and, of course, it has a long history. We can divide it into the periods before the Cold War and after the Cold War. One might think that there would have been a gradual synchronization between the West and East after the fall of the Iron Curtain, but the opposite is true—the relationships have become even more complicated. Western Europe continued to play the position of the most important player. The expectation of post-totalitarian countries to integrate quickly into the European artistic structure has remained unfulfilled, although several projects have emerged from this disillusion. This is well illustrated by the book *East Art Map* with its subtitle *Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*. The book was published in 2006 by the Slovenian group IRWIN and its ambition was to reconstruct the missing history of Eastern Europe art from the authentic Eastern European perspective. In my opinion, it was a reaction to the fact that the so-called Eastern European art was included only selectively in the Western history of the 20th century art—or even excluded altogether. And this is one of the most important issues that art historians and critics have been discussing in Slovakia since 1989 until now. I would like to note that we can see some change in how Slovakian critics interpret, for instance, Western art from the post-war time, between 1945 and the 1960s. Recently, a critical reading of Western cultural diplomacy has emerged. Mária Orišková analyzed important exhibitions of American abstract art that appeared in Czechoslovakia after the second world war as tools of ideological propaganda. This is a very different outlook to what we are used to. At the same time, we are also witnessing a new reading of artists, who played a negative role in the period of social realism in the 1950s. For instance, Ladislav Čemický has a considerable showing now in Liptovský Mikuláš and the title of this exhibition is telling—*Painter, Teacher, Functionary*. Mind the order... The younger generation doesn't approach this artist solely as a communist official, but also puts an effort into discovering his work, and especially the works he made before 1950. Something that was not interesting for my peers, the next generation now tries to read in a much more complex way.

AP: It seems like Serge Gilbault proved important not only in Poland, but also in Slovakia. Attila, what's your perspective on the East versus West dichotomy?

AH: Again, this is a complicated matter to address. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, borders were open and people had a chance to visit countries more often than once every three years, and to also stay there, attend residences, and use other opportunities—including a rising amount of money that was being invested in contemporary art, publications, research... That was really, in



some ways, a shock. The world opened up, and the West really did appear here, especially with the Soros Center for Culture and Communication and other similar organizations. I think the 1990s went by with a sense of trying to catch up [with the West], and Kiossev's idea of self-colonization might have been appropriate for the Hungarian context back then. However, if we look back at the past 30 years, the remaining part of this period was marked by something else. At a certain point, the idea that the national culture should prevail started to become much more widespread. Here in Hungary, we have had about 12 years of the Fidesz government by now—but even before culture was getting more and more centralized. Even the previous government—kind of liberal or left-liberal—was trying to centralize certain institutions and dictate their programming, mostly because of limited financial resources.

The crucial question for me is not necessarily whether the West is colonizing the East—or even if the East is self-colonizing... What I'm interested in is whether the Eastern states and institutions have enough money or power to represent their culture within the region and beyond its borders. Can Hungarian artists make it to Art Basel? Can they make it to Paris Photo? Can we create valuable art historical knowledge that would support the presence of our art and artists in various parts of the world? Are we able to do this? I would risk the assumption that Hungary does not look at contemporary fine art as a means of cultural diplomacy in the same way it does at classical music, for instance, or perhaps some kinds of literature. These fields are well subsidized by the state, whereas contemporary art—and especially the art we have been talking about—as overly critical, perhaps far too costly, and non-understandable for most people. It's almost a socialist-realist kind of criticism of contemporary art. It's not for the masses, so why subsidize it? And yet, the art that the decision-makers would like to subsidize is not a viable means of cultural diplomacy. Meanwhile, the art that could gain real traction is just not happening. It would need art historical books, that would need production subsidies from the government to be produced, and so on. So, the question now is not so much how the West colonizes the East—but rather how the East, especially Hungary, can represent itself in the affluent Western environment.

**AP:** I'm confident that this sentiment is shared across our region.

By now, two overarching themes emerged within our conversation. The first is the capitalist cultural economy and how art institutions or art critics have responded to it—but also how they contributed to its workings. The other theme is the dialectic of freedom and censorship—and I understand censorship here very broadly... Not only as removing certain kinds of art from the public view but also, for instance, as exerting economic pressure...

**DM:** I would like to add a few words on the efforts made by our governments in the field of exporting and promoting art from

Central Europe abroad. In Poland, we had a lot of luck and managed to convince the officials at some point. AICA Poland played an important role in it. We convinced Waldemar Dąbrowski—the former minister of culture [in 2002-2005]—to support the presence of Polish artists at important art fairs. Some of us did not put much faith in the cultural politics that relies on sending government exhibitions to public institutions in the West. We believed that we would never promote our artists successfully in this manner—and that using the market means was necessary. Since around 2004 or 2005, two consecutive cabinets provided financial support to galleries to feature Polish artists at fairs. This turned out to be a very successful policy. In this way, we promoted a relatively large group of Polish painters, including Wilhelm Sasnal and Paulina Ołowska. We don't necessarily like the market, but the market is the most effective means of promoting artists. We decided to use the same means that work well in other parts of the world. It was vital because, through the art fairs, we entered the international exchange on the same terms as everybody else.

**AP:** Would you agree, though, that the private sector might provide a certain sense of artistic freedom when it is curtailed elsewhere? It seems like a widespread sentiment in the current political climate...

**DM:** I don't believe this to be the case... I have trust in promoting artists through very effective market means, but of course, it becomes very complicated when other values are considered. I observed what happened after 2000, when a new wave of political censorship emerged in Poland and artists had no place to exhibit for two or three years, and they tried to organize the private sector themselves, for example, in cooperatives. These activities allowed the artists to be active only on a very low level because art needs money, institutions, art criticism, freedom, and very often it needs ample physical space. It also needs a public space, where ideas can compete freely. Now, clearly, the art market is more developed in Poland than it was in 2000, and there are more collectors and more valuable private collections in Poland—but still, there are not too many. Especially now that the biggest collector [Grażyna Kulczyk] left Poland and founded her museum in Switzerland—and did so because of the political pressure in Poland. Recently even more collectors have exported their collections to Luxembourg or Switzerland, afraid of the ruling party's politics. I doubt that the private money and private institutions can fully replace the public galleries in Poland. Especially because private collectors are usually rather conservative in our countries. We have private galleries, and there is quite a wide range of art that is exhibited there. However, the whole business has to be about objects because one has to sell them. So, I think that activist art in Poland faces many problems now.

**AP:** It seems that the issue of artistic freedom does not look bright from your perspective.

**DM:** You shouldn't direct these questions to me because I am so pessimistic...

**AP:** Attila, are you maybe more optimistic?

**AH:** Dorota, you cannot be more pessimistic than I am. Here is my very short answer. There is a caveat to this, though... What I was trying to explain before was that Hungarian art is not well represented elsewhere, the reason being that there is not much concern for it in the country. There's no real power to back it up, which means that it's not taken seriously in many ways. Contemporary fine art is not really present in the debate on current culture in Hungary—but this means, in the end, that it can do whatever it wants. There is no censorship. I don't really see any. If you go to the Hungarian National Gallery, there is an exhibition on Gyula Derkovits, a significant painter from the first world war and the following decade, who was a left-wing artist, an important socialist artist. When his exhibition was mounted, a few ideas came to my mind: is that a good moment right now to show it, and especially to feature it at the National Gallery? Similar questions appear from time to time [in the public discourse]. But overall, I don't really see any censorship in the traditional, narrow sense because it is just not necessary. What I see is that various cultural institutions—including artistic institutions—are centralized. Their directors are appointed not simply by the government or the state, but rather by the party, by the Fidesz. Some of the directors are even giving these interviews, saying that they are 100 percent loyal to our prime minister Viktor Orbán and his politics. This means that they are not critical in any sense, and that the cultural institutions—dedicated to fine art, literature or other practices—will not be critical in any sense. And this is the big problem. It's not so much the censorship in terms of certain art being produced or not; certain exhibitions being mounted or not. It is rather whether and how certain institutions are run, such as the National Gallery, the National Museum, and most importantly, the Petőfi Literary Museum, which now has a peculiar director. He has so much power—the big central library belongs to him, and the pop music industry belongs to him. Basically, he has power over fifty or sixty percent of the Hungarian cultural industry.

What happened in the 1960s or 1970s was that some shows were just shut down after a day. This doesn't happen because it's just not necessary—the artists are not taken seriously anyway. But the government—that is to say, the central government—occupies the important art places and creates a false national narrative in these institutions, which takes up much of money being spent on culture in Hungary. So, what happens is that there are fewer and fewer independent spaces that are larger than an apartment. Just like in the Fetcher era, one may use tiny venues and some of them make their way to the surface. Small art communities come together to create spaces and create an interesting underground

culture. And this is important. The big problem is that you cannot really translate what happens in the microinstitutions—their production modes and exhibitions—into a larger environment. It's just impossible to do that, so the scene remains local and never grows out because the next step is a structural problem. There is perhaps a vibrant underground artistic subculture that relies on minimal funding. However, the next possible steps are just taken away. Hardly anything remains, like the Venice Biennale. Some important artists may go there, but this opportunity doesn't create a viable life perspective for an artist. It's just impossible to build a sustainable practice because there is this impossible gap between the smaller, authentic institutions and the larger ones that are inauthentic.

DM: I'm afraid that here in Poland we are going in the same direction. Currently, we actually do face direct acts of censorship. Artworks by Natalia LL were taken down from an exhibition in the National Museum in Warsaw; there were acts of censorship in the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk. The main tenet of this censorship is "history"—namely, who tells the history and in whose name. However, soon there will be fewer acts of censorship because the government will inevitably change the directors of the main public institutions, so there will be fewer projects in contradiction with the actual political expectations of the ruling party. As there are not very many people with the required expertise that support the party, it is enough to be on the right side to become a director. There is a lot of uncertainty [surrounding the programming of public institutions]. This year's newly appointed directors act according to the plans prepared by their predecessors, but we don't know what will happen next year. What will their ideas be? In fact, we face a fight against intellectuals and professionals. It will push us many years back in the field of curatorial practice and the development of new museology. When the public institutions are overtaken, the artistic public has no place to go and meet. Normally I prefer not be so dramatic, but the topic does not allow indifference.

**AP: Jana, do you have any comments on censorship and artistic freedom in Slovakia?**

JG: I think that the worst situation in Slovakia was in the 1990s. With that in mind, I absolutely understand Attila and how he described the current situation. However, in Slovakia, very provocative feminist art is now becoming part of public collections—and only at the Slovak National Gallery but also at regional galleries. This is a very positive development—and maybe a beam of hope...

AP: As we approach the end of the discussion, I would like to ask you how you perceive the quality of cultural exchange between countries in our region—especially with respect to art criticism. Do you think that as neighbors we know each other's achievements well enough? Did the fall of the Iron Curtain help us maintain our relationships or did it make this effort more difficult?

AH: When it comes to certain art critics, they do have connections in the region; there is a discernible understanding and knowledge of what's going on in the region... But on a small, even minimal scale. Perhaps we as Hungarians are not knowledgeable enough. There was an interesting effort from an online paper that applied for Visegrád funding and invited art critics from the region to visit Hungary, sent Hungarian art critics to other countries, and published translations in collaboration with various journals from the region. So, there are attempts to strengthen the bonds. I would say, though, that we do not excel at this kind of communication.

DM: I was thinking about this question before our discussion. There were two initiatives that were, in my opinion, very successful. First, there was the art magazine *Presence*, which was published around 2000, and now we have *Blok Magazine*, which is published in English. I checked today and found that multiple authors contribute to this magazine. Piotr Piotrowski was crucial for our network. When I was working on certain catalogues and wanted to invite authors from the Czech Republic, Slovakia or Hungary, I used to ask Magdalena Radomska or another student of Piotr Piotrowski to tell me who was writing about what and where. When I was running the museum [in Wrocław], I made cooperation with the countries of the Visegrád Group a point of my program, so we had the retrospective of Jiří Kovanda. We also had a great exhibition of Slovak conceptual art. Unfortunately, I stopped being a director in 2016, but my next plan was to show the group of Pécs Workshop from Hungary. At the museum, we were especially interested in conceptual art in Central Europe, and we were welcoming exhibitions of this sort. The city of Wrocław was crucial in the conceptual movement, so we followed the historical paths of cooperation between the artists themselves. This way, we ended up making exhibitions in Košice, Zagreb, and Budapest, but unfortunately not in Prague. The years 2009–2016 were very busy in terms of artistic exchange in our region. Also, Andrzej Szczerski [the former president of AICA Poland and current director of the National Museum in Kraków] co-organized a congress in Bratislava and Kraków. There were many possibilities to meet each other and get to know each other, so I'm not so critical about this. In Warsaw, there was also an exhibition of Maria Bartusová, a Slovak artist from Košice. The Museum in Wrocław purchased 14 artworks from 14 artists from Hungary, the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic in five years (five artists from Hungary, five artists from the Czech Republic, and four artists from the Slovak Republic, of the older and younger generations). On the way, we learned quite a lot about our neighbors. Also, special reports were published in Polish art magazines. I mean, in professional circles, we were very well informed, and we presented art from the whole region to the public. The exhibitions were followed by art criticism. The project we are currently taking part in is the next step in mutual exchange, and I am very optimistic about it. In the

1990s, when I wanted to see colleagues from Hungary, Slovakia or the Czech Republic, I had to go to Vienna because there was a Hungarian curator, Lóránd Hegyi, who was making exhibitions of Central European art at mumok. Now we do not need a third party to meet and collaborate. I think that is big progress.

**AP:** Jana, would you like to give a quick response?

**JG:** I agree with Dorota. I am also not very pessimistic, and I am delighted that Dorota mentioned the magazine *Presence*, which was really crucial and well-prepared. The initiator was a Hungarian colleague and there was an exceptional structure built around the journal—a vast network of regional editors who mapped events in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Croatia, Poland, Macedonia, and also Austria. It was a mix of the West and the East. It is really a pity that the magazine was discontinued after four years. From the Slovakian perspective, I would also like to mention the cooperation with the AICA Hungary at the time when Erzsébet Tatai acted as the section's president. In 2000, we organized an international symposium whose title was *Conceptual Art at the Beginning of the New Millennium*, which was also based on cooperation between Slovak, Czech, and Croatian artists. The most important speaker was Tony Godfrey from London. He wrote an essential book called *Conceptual Art*, which was published in 1998, two years before our other symposium, and was very relevant at this time. Considering these projects from the last twenty or twenty-five years, I am not so pessimistic. There are also more and more new efforts—such as *Secondary Archive*, a great project of the Katarzyna Kozyra Foundation. It is an excellent open platform for the documentation of women artists from Visegrád countries.

**AP:** Let's hope that our project will indeed contribute to strengthening cultural relations in the region.



# ART CRITICISM AFTER 1989 IN HUNGARY

In our selection, we have not attempted to present the art criticism of the past 32 years. Instead we have concentrated on the post-socialist and/or early capitalist period after 1989. This period, which broadly covers the 1990s, may be suitable for in-depth art historical analysis and is in the focus of many international research projects. The dedicated space available did not allow us to cover all the major trends of the last 32 years, but by concentrating on the 1990s, we have been able to present not just the major trends but the history of art criticism as a dialectical structure of opinions and counter-opinions. In the discussed period, we could identify almost every theme that defined contemporary artistic discourses. These broadly coincide with the chapter-categories of the volume, but there are also significant differences as well. Art and art criticism in Hungary in the 1990s were mainly influenced by new media tendencies and by techno-utopian ideologies, while in the 2000s discourses around historical traumas and the concept of “Central or Eastern Europe” also become relevant topics. The topic of “otherness and politics of identities” was less significant in Hungary while the direct political censorship is very difficult to detect, even after Fidesz’s violations against the autonomy of the artistic field after 2010.<sup>1</sup> Since art criticism is usually connected to exhibitions, we have selected texts mainly related to exhibitions of the decade that became subsequently canonised.<sup>2</sup> We have also included a few texts that are not classical exhibition critiques, but can contribute to the understanding of the processes taking place in the artistic field after 1989. At last, we did not want to highlight a single artist or a single artist’s exhibition in our selection, rather we were focusing on group exhibitions and texts covering larger art-related issues or phenomena.

Following Pierre Bourdieu’s logic, the art system after 1989 was becoming an artistic field with a specific internal set of rules, with constant position struggles and

1 Fidesz (Hungarian Civic Alliance) is a right-wing populist and national-conservative political party in Hungary, led by Viktor Orbán.

2 The exhibition history of the decade was first analysed by Sándor Hornyik, “Avantgárd és popkultúra - Fejezetek a kilencvenes évek képzőművészetéből,” in *Gyönyörű ez a mai nap! A nyolcvanas és a kilencvenes évek képzőművészete - Történet és elmélet* ed. András Rényi and Katalin Aknai (Budapest: MAOE, 2003), 31-61.

finally with “relative autonomy” regarding the political and economic fields.<sup>3</sup> In such systems the art of the “restricted field of cultural production” is considered as high art and occupies the symbolically powerful positions and institutions. In the artistic field, where a so-called “permanent” *revolution* was institutionalized, art criticism follows both the internal conflicts of the field and the external political and economy-based conflicts. In post-1989 art criticism, two fundamental oppositions can be detected. The first conflict was between artists and critics considered to be contemporary or progressive and the followers of the “fine art” traditions. These discourses were heavily influenced by cultural political struggles, as the conservative politicians often favored the fine artists, while the liberal political elites tended to support contemporary art. The second conflict took place within the restricted field of cultural production. These conflicts took place between the “consecrated” and “heretic” representatives of the progressive field and often took the form of generational conflicts.

The expansion of art, which was considered contemporary, took place in most countries of the former Eastern Bloc. It generated controversies including the confrontation of two opposing institutional models, expanding beyond mere aesthetic aspects. The Union-based model of real socialism, of which symbolic platforms were the Salon-type exhibitions, gradually came into conflict with the new curator-based precariat model of contemporary art. The latter, according to Octavian Esanu, was mostly promoted by the SCCA (Soros Center for Contemporary Arts) network in Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> In the 1990s, the Hungarian SCCA mainly supported new or inter-media, computer or internet-based art. In our selection, these exhibitions are represented by a review written by Gábor Bora. In addition to the new media and techno-utopian tendencies, the SCCA also aimed to promote the so-called “*issue-based*” contemporary art in Hungary. However, this tendency only became popular and successful in the 2010s. Although Hungarian contemporary artists were not that much interested in social or political issues in the 1990s, the 1993 *Polyphony* [Polifónia] exhibition organized by the SCCA became one of the most canonized exhibitions of the decade and one of the most discussed exhibitions in Central-Eastern-Europe’s post-1989 art history.<sup>5</sup> The exhibition which fits both into the categories of “art in public spaces” and “politically engaged art” is discussed in a review of Géza Boros.

The most important conflict zone of the struggles between the contemporary and the Union-models was the Budapest Műcsarnok / Kunsthalle. Throughout the 1990s, serious debates took place between the leadership of the Kunsthalle and the artists who were interested in Salon-type exhibitions. In 1990, the Kunsthalle hosted the Salon exhibition of the Union of Hungarian Fine and Applied artists, which received mostly negative critical reactions. In connection with the 1990 Salon and the Union, we have selected reviews written by Árpád Tímár and András Bán and a summarizing text written by Lajos Németh. After 1991, it seemed that the Salon-type exhibitions were off the agenda and that contemporary art could finally gain hegemonic position in the main institutions. However, from the middle of the decade, the debates around the Kunsthalle and the Salon took on a political dimension. Some artists who could not exhibit in the country’s main institutions, argued that the Kunsthalle and the main institutions in general were hosting too many international exhibitions and representing only a narrow “elite” of the Hungarian art scene. This rhetoric suited well the populist “culture war” discourse of the

3 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993); —, *The Rules of Art – Genesis and Structure* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

4 Octavian Esanu, “What was Contemporary Art?,” *Art Margins*, no. 1 (2012); —, *The Post-socialist Contemporary – The Institutionalization of Artistic Practice in Eastern Europe after 1989* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

5 See for example *Ibid.*, 177-190.



conservative-nationalist political and intellectual elites and the debates around the Kunsthalle and the Salon became the most discussed art issues in the media in the 1990s. The debate reached its zenith during the 1998 election campaign which was finally won by Viktor Orbán's Fidesz. This discourse is represented in our selection by an interview with László Beke, who was at the time the director of the Kunsthalle. At the end of the 1990s, during the first Fidesz government, the culture war discourse and the process of political polarization reached its Zenith.<sup>6</sup>

The "*art before 1989*" has become one of the most important issues in post-1989 art criticism. On the one hand it became possible to establish new art historical canons after 1989, on the other hand, an institutional rehabilitation of formerly marginalized artists started. The so-called rehabilitation-exhibitions – perhaps the most characteristic exhibitions of the decade – focused on (neo)avant-garde art from the 1960s and 1970s. These exhibitions were mainly attacked by the artists who were following the fine art traditions, but by the second half of the decade some critics arrived from the progressive side as well. Edit András' and Gábor András's essays appeared in the catalog of the exhibition – presenting a new generation of female artists – held in the Hungarian Pavilion at the 1997 Venice Biennale. András's drew attention to the fact that in Hungary, art considered progressive could have appeared in the main institutions already in the beginning of the 1980s. Thus, according to him the artistic change took place long before the political changes. Since András criticized both the dominant structuralist-formalist art criticism of the time and the patriarchal nature of pre-1989 art, her text fits both the categories of "critique of critique" and "feminism, gender and body". The hottest debate around pre-1989 art was over an essay written by János Sturcz. According to Sturcz the older generation became immensely over-favoured after 1989, and suppressed the chances of the younger artists to assert themselves. Among the many responses to Sturcz's text, we have selected Imre Bak's reply.<sup>7</sup>

Most of the texts included in our selection can be placed in the category of "art in the transition period". In the second half of the 1990s, the feminist/gender-related critique became an important trend. Thus in addition to András' essay this topic is also represented in our selection by a text written by Katalin Timár. Finally, our selection also includes some texts that were thematizing the concept of Central or Eastern Europe and the problematics of "post-socialism". The reviews written by Zoltán Nagy and Péter György were about the two main international exhibitions around the turn of the millennium which were presenting the art of post-socialist Europe. Bálint Chikán's text is also related to this topic. However, it is not a critical text, but a summary of an international conference organized around the concept of the "region" in 1991. We thought it is important to include this text because the participants of the conference were surprisingly right regarding the possible future of the post-socialist region and it was perhaps the first conference where the idea of creating a regional art journal first arose.

6 After the reelection of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in 2010, almost all the artistic discourses of the 1990s returned. The Art-related debates were dominated by the conflicts around the takeover of the state-owned institutions by the Fidesz-connected Hungarian Academy of Arts. The new leadership reinvented the Salon-type exhibitions in the Kunsthalle and proclaimed that politically engaged art is no longer welcomed in the building. As a reaction many artists, critics and curators boycotted the institution. As a phenomenon resulting from this context, OFF Biennale was inaugurated, which in many ways resembled the disputes around the *Polyphony* exhibition.

7 The 2010s also saw a revival of the debates around the (neo)avant-garde. At the beginning of the decade, the art of the 1960s and 1970s was rediscovered by the market and heavily promoted by some leading commercial galleries, which led to reconstructions and deconstructions of the grand narratives and myths around the (neo)avant-garde.

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# INTRODUCTION (ART CRITICISM IN SLOVAKIA AFTER 1989)

*Blank Spaces, Black Holes:* under this heading AICA's 46th annual world congress was held in Slovakia (Košice and Bratislava) in 2013. It was organised by one of the youngest and smallest national AICA sections.<sup>1</sup> Although the enduring asynchronicity between western art and the art of the remaining “non-western” world was at the centre of attention, some papers were devoted to the status of criticism: its power, or rather its impotence. These pronouncements might be valid if we compare their current status, their seeming invisibility, with the passionate polemics between members of the various groupings of opinion that we know from the history of early modernism. Then the representatives of individual *-isms* defined themselves negatively not only in relation to contemporary artistic convention, but even each against the others: Dadaism versus cubism, Russian constructivism versus cubism and futurism, etc. This contention was also taking place within individual movements such as surrealism, where André Breton excommunicated artists who did not accept his doctrine without qualification. In our own geopolitical area, we might mention the destructive criticism, contaminated with politics (especially in the 1950s and again in the 1970s), connected with the imposed dogma of socialist realism. This was a mode of criticism which could have had an existential impact on an artist, involving not merely the closing down of an exhibition or expulsion from the Union of Artists, but in extreme cases even imprisonment.

At present, we are still exploiting the principle of plurality declared by post-modernism, which is both preached and practised in art. Criticism has a different form from that described above; it respects cultural diversity and the right to one's own opinion, proceeding from the premise that no one single truth exists. We might say that criticism is becoming a process of reflection whose aim is not to pronounce a critical opinion on the work explicitly or single-mindedly. Rather, the strength or

1 The Slovak section of AICA was founded in 1994, after the break-up of Czechoslovakia, when the original Czechoslovak section split into two independent national units. The President of the Slovak section of AICA, which organised the 46th World Congress in 2013, was Juraj Čarný, who led the team that prepared the event.

weakness of this work is disclosed by placing it in a wider context, in the world not only of art, but of culture and society as well. The first key word for the comprehension of present-day criticism might be “intertextuality” (Julia Kristeva’s term), which implies that the work is not a self-subsistent cultural artefact but that it enters into relations with other works. The artist, while creating, is influenced by a multitude of past or present artworks, and this regardless of whether or not he/she/they is conscious of such influences and connections. One of the tasks of criticism is to reveal this context. A second key word could be “empathy”, not only as it is defined in hermeneutics, that is to say a capacity to comprehend the work. If we were to employ Roland Barthes’s vocabulary, we would speak of comprehending the intention of the work and also of comprehending the intention of its author. The relation between these intentions is not necessarily an identity. Hence, the critic should be capable of seeing what has made its way into the work, not only in accordance with but even contrary to the author’s purpose; and indeed, also what is absent from the work, even if it were present in the author’s program. If we are asking about the importance of criticism, we should simultaneously ask who it is designed for. Today, there are practically no works at all which are so autonomous that their meaning can be comprehended simply by immediately viewing them. The fully charged experience is often mediated by a guiding commentary, an interpretation. This is not, however, merely a service to the viewer, a means of leading him/her/them into the labyrinth of meanings, but also (or above all) what Hal Foster called “a retroactive effect of countless responses and critical readings”.<sup>2</sup> Foster illustrated this with a statement by Marcel Duchamp, who declared that his status as an emblematic 20th century figure did not appear *ex nihilo*, but actually grew very slowly, and in fact, by repeated relevant interpretations. If I were to update this historical example in our domestic Slovak context, in place of Duchamp I would set an icon of our 20th century art: Július Koller; and as the canonising texts, I would choose papers by Tomáš Štraus, László Béke, Aurel Hrabušický, Petra Hanáková, Roman Ondák and Vít Havránek. These authors gradually constructed the position of Koller as the emblematic figure of our art in the second half of the 20th century, although in the authentic contemporary materials of the 1960s, his presence is actually marginal. What is demonstrated here is the fact that critical texts are indeed the supporting pillars which hold together the construction of 20th century art history.

The diversity of critical writing is a different question. In *What Happened to Art Criticism*, James Elkins used the metaphor of a mythological figure, the hydra with seven heads.<sup>3</sup> The genres of critical writing are defined very broadly in his interpretation. He lists not only descriptive and normative criticism but also “the catalogue essay, the academic treatise, cultural criticism, the conservative harangue, the philosophic essay, descriptive art criticism and poetic art criticism”.<sup>4</sup> The selection of texts for our current anthology is based on different priorities. Our ambition was to present writing that represents the adventure of critical reflection, where analysis is given preference over description, innovation over convention; where questions are posed, even on the assumption that the answers will not be unambiguous. So as nonetheless to ensure genre variety and at least partially to cover the individual thematic categories of this anthology, we have included two academic studies (chapter: Gender and Body;

2 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA–London: The MIT Press, 1996), 8. The Czech translation —, “Co je nového na neoavantgardě?”, *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, no. 8 (2010): 66.

3 James Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 16–17.

4 Ibid.

Feminism), a review of an exhibition (chapter: Institutional Critique), a transcript of a round table discussion (chapter: Art During the Transition Period), a brief essay devoted to a single model work chapter: Otherness and Politics of Identities) and an article which is criticism of the period criticism of the 1950s and 1970s (category: Political (Engaged) Art and Censorship).

Due to the limited span of the anthology, we could not include excellent texts by Gábor Hushegyi, Jana Oravcová, Petra Hanáková, Richard Gregor, Daniel Grůň, Omar Mirza, Vladimíra Büngerová, Lýdia Pribišová, Alexandra Tamášová, and other colleagues who take part in public discussion and co-create the picture of our art. It is precisely this critical potential that guarantees we will be able to respond to the challenges, civic as well as artistic, which we are currently confronted with by the unprecedented military aggression of Russia against Ukraine.

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# BRIEF REMARKS ON ART CRITICISM IN POLAND AFTER 1989

Far from marking a political breakthrough, the year 1989 was rather a stage in what can be described as a gradual transformation. In the arts, changes had begun to take place several years before, eventually leaving no element in the area unaffected, be it organisation of artistic life or the language of art. Art criticism didn't emerge unscathed, either. Its form and style evolved in close connection with the developments occurring within the arts. Criticism adopted a new stance towards the world, as did art. New ways of writing and new subjects appeared.

These processes intensified as the next generation of critics came on the scene. From the late 1980s on, new periodicals, including *Art & Business* (since 1989), *Obieg* (since 1987), *Exit* (since 1990), *Format* (since 1990) and, first of all, *Magazyn Sztuki* (since 1993), offered more possibilities for publication. A number of ephemeral self-published magazines were released. Art critical articles were accepted by literary, social and cultural journals, many of them established soon after 1989, and those that had existed before were undergoing remodelling. The foundation of *Raster*, initially in the form of a literary and art zine, in 1993 ultimately sealed the fundamental changes in criticism as such, its range of subject matters and its language.

The next wave of changes arrived with a new medium – the Internet which, from the mid-1990s on, brought about greater diversity of opinion and dispersal of critical writing. The first art magazine available online was *Fototapeta*, established in 1995, the above-mentioned *Raster* went digital in 1997, while another influential journal of the time, *Obieg*, launched its online version only in 2004.

The Internet granted authors independence from publishers. The new communication channel was embraced by critics who soon took to blogging, notably including Izabela Kowalczyk with her blog dedicated to critical art and feminism, Jakub Banasiak posting about the latest on the art scene and carrying out metacritical analysis, and Karolina Plinta, a representative of the younger generation who developed her own style of expression at the intersection of literature and criticism, with a hefty dose of satirical and autobiographical content. The possibility to add instant comments to any critical entry and receive a reply from the author was a

novelty generating heated discussions where one-way communication pertaining to a given text had come before.

The chance offered by the Net was also grabbed by the magazines *Arteon* and *Obieg*. The discussion forums they created enabled readers to respond to articles without delay, and so they did before trolls took over. Early online criticism developed in the first decade of the new millennium, but it was largely ousted by social media gaining in popularity in the following decade.

The ready availability of criticism ensured by the global network came at the expense of its quality; critical essays began to read as if they had been hastily produced drafts. The impact of advertising, popular culture, and tabloid journalism had started to show in texts dealing with art even earlier, in the mid-1990s. A short-lived liaison formed between critics and popular press in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Most of them out of print now, such glossy magazines as *Fluid*, *Maxx*, *Aktivist*, or *Machina*, held attraction for the best authors of the time (e.g. Adam Szymczyk) for a while; this tradition is continued today by the lifestyle quarterly *Przekrój*, regularly publishing Stach Szabłowski's articles, and Polish *Vogue* with Anda Rottenberg acting as the arts and culture editor.

The importance of art criticism is now clearly on the decline. Although, judging by the number of magazines, the situation in Poland may appear satisfactory for writers wishing to share their work, the majority of them are low-circulation local periodicals, read by few. Two nationwide journals, *Szum* with its characteristically harsh and straightforward style of criticism developed over 10 years of its presence on the market, and *Dwutygodnik* appearing online, presenting visual arts against a broad cultural background, enjoy the greatest popularity and exert the biggest influence. There are quite a few criticism-related initiatives, periodicals published by art galleries (e.g. *Magazyn RTV* in Poznań), by art schools (e.g. *Powidoki* in Łódź) and, last but not least, self-published magazines (*Fragile* and *artpapier*).

Art podcasts are drawing a rather wide audience these days, but no prominent critic in Poland is using the medium of film to communicate. For a long time, criticism was virtually absent from Polish mainstream media, but cultural journalism has been on the rise in recent years.

Nevertheless, underfunding remains an acute problem: few authors can afford to earn their living as critics. This is a result of the structural problem related to low pay levels in the cultural sector in general, as well as a symptom of the deepening crisis of the press.

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The new capitalist reality found criticism largely devoid of a vocabulary and instruments to describe the changes occurring in the field of art. The transformations had been somewhat anticipated by the famous *Report on the Condition of Criticism* prepared by AICA Poland in 1981, devoted to the reliance of criticism on political power and its economic state.

Generally speaking, criticism before 1989 operated within a territory delineated by modernist concepts, references and values. As nihilism began to creep into art, steering it towards the body and hammering away at the state for breaking its contract with the people, criticism couldn't but reach for a language opposite to the new era. The first to bring it into consistent use was a group of Poznań-based authors, gathered around the eminent art historian Piotr Piotrowski. Drawing substantially upon poststructuralism, these critics derived inspiration from Foucault's thought and the French school, which they approached via American writings. The group's primary focus was on free expression, corporeality as a battlefield, and the problem of power.



But a new kind of art was soon to arrive, glorifying the pleasures of ordinary life highly sought after by the emergent middle class. The dream of little stabilisation was kept alive by *Raster*, initially a literary zine. Its authors notched up an enormous success by promoting so-called “new banalism” in their descriptive, reportage-like articles celebrating superficiality, replacing in-depth analyses with wit and flair.

The 1990s also witnessed emancipatory struggles finding their way into art criticism, with feminism setting the tone at first, but eventually opening to more subtle approaches, queering as well as de- and post-colonial inquiries. These issues were investigated in relation to democratisation of the public sphere and civil society. Socially engaged artistic practices, characteristic for intellectual life in Poland, were also under debate. After 1989, democratisation of the public sphere in Poland stepped into the foreground, and when Poland joined the EU, art in public space became an extensively discussed topic.



# ON CZECH ART CRITICISM AFTER THE “VELVET REVOLUTION” OF 1989

In the days of the Czech Republic's socialist past, art criticism performed an “interpreting task” in relation to artists and the public, primarily in written form, such as texts for catalogues or reviewing exhibitions. The critic was supposed to be the one who paraphrases, explains, or criticizes the visual work. It was assumed that the critics themselves do not create it, only make value judgments and judgments. During the past three decades, however, there has been a change in the understanding of the critical profession within the art scene, from writing comments to actively participating in the creation and presentation of the work. In society, not only the political and economic system was transformed, but also cultural institutions and media. What had the greatest influence on art was the mental change associated with the freedom to travel, the democratisation of the media and the access to information. Equally important was the gradual acclimation to multiculturalism, gender issues, ecological and globalisation topics, as well as the adaptation to the rules of the free market.

As a result of this development, there was a more advanced collaboration between the theoretician and the artist and an emphasis on the interactive concept of art. On the one hand, the writing critic became an impartial journalist, while on the other hand, they formed the profession of a so-called “gallerist” or “curator”, in a setting of closer cooperation with the artist. Theoretical work with an academic focus remained to be significant, and so was the pedagogical activity. Nevertheless, from the mid-1990s, a number of art critics and historians began to organise and conceive exhibitions together with artists, thereby introducing a new content of work. The work expressed both the notion of a curator and the notion of a dramaturg in galleries, in the formation of a professional base for direct communication with the public. The exhibition activity turned the gallery into a living communication platform, and later also initiated its market application. In addition to my work in this area, first in the Mánes exhibition hall and later in the Gallery of Art Critics, numerous other colleagues can be named in the new role. Among others, one should mention Petr Nedoma at the Rudolfinum Gallery, Jiří Švestka at the Švestka Gallery, Vít Havránek at the Association and tranzit.cz gallery, Ludvík Hlaváček at Karlín studios and the Center for Contemporary Art, and Magdalena Juříková at GHMP. They are all still active today.

The transformation of a writing critic into an executive manager and media-communicator, however, occurred earlier in the world, notably from the beginning of the 1970s with the onset of performance, conceptual and installation art. The critic collaborated with the artist during the preparation and the course of events at a certain place (“in situ”). The collaboration was so close that he became a co-creator of unrepeatable, unique situations, with an emphasis on the immediate experience of the “here and now”. They acted as a direct participant in the event and then helped anchor the direct experience in a visual record, transforming it into a new work. It was not relevant whether the media record is only a sketch on a piece of paper or a photograph. What was important was the finding that as a document, it can also function effectively as an original (in line with Marshall McLuhan’s thesis “medium is the message”). As a result of the development of new technologies, it acquired an increasingly unique value and communicated a message that would have disappeared within living memory without media mediation. In this way, the collaboration of artist and curator was foreshadowed in the event, and conversely, the ambition of artists to become curators arose.

Since then, we have looked at organising exhibitions and writing texts differently than before. It does not apply so much to contributions to artist exhibitions, where a degree of empathy for the author’s work is a self-evident assumption, but mainly to the conception of group exhibitions, today called “thematic.” In the essay by Martina Pachmanová *Who is the curator?* (2007) and later in the publication *Medium curator* (2009) she writes: “although until recently the ideal of curatorial work was professed as an objectifying and objective activity, there is no doubt that curatorial work with contemporary art – like art-historical interpretation of the art of the past – is not and cannot be completely neutral, since the impartial, unencumbered, objective view ‘from nowhere’ is a myth and not a reality. (...) Beyond the simple explanation of conceptual intent, curatorial work consists in appropriating, repatriating, editing and weaving together visual texts”.<sup>1</sup> So let’s say that curating is to a large extent a creative and subjective exercise.

The only problem is, and the curators are aware of this pitfall, that the subjective view of the group action is an expression of their creative ego. For their expressive gesture, art is a valuable material on which they can apply their own creative intention. Then the curator can be blamed for not understanding well or in their creative enthusiasm for not managing the theme and causing harm in the interpretation of the participating artists. However, this criticism does not appear often because the curator, even with a completely personal and subjective concept of the topic, does not cease to be the administrator in the presentation of the works. They continue to be the interpreter not only of the entire exhibition, but of each work of art with which they work.

However, we distinguish between curators of so-called “stone institutions”, i.e., museums, which create collections, and curators of “living art” in contemporary art galleries, whose work mainly consists of non-profit exhibition projects. The museum curator cares for the collection objects as well as the presentation of their art-historical content. The gallery curator of contemporary art mainly cares for the presentation and the interpretation of works – by connecting the artist’s work and its presentation into one living organism. We could find several common denominators in both curatorial approaches. It is necessary to remember, however, that the role of the actual art curator in non-commercial galleries mainly favours experimentation, profiling and inclusion of works in a context of the dramaturgy of activity of the gallery. This context often

1 Martina Pachmanová, *Věrnost v pohybu. Hovory o feminizmu, dějinách a vizualitě* (Praha: One Woman Press, 2001). David Korecký, ed., *Medium kurátor – role kurátora v současném českém umění* (Praha: Agite / Fra, 2009).

anticipates the theme of collective exhibitions, which are then developed and summarised by contributing institutions or collection-type “stone museums”.

Furthermore, if the curator knows the gallery space thoroughly, he no longer needs an exhibition architect for the installation. They are even a better advisor for the presentation of the work than the exhibition architect used to be in the past, thus becoming a better and more efficient interpreter. If the curator can communicate with the work in a non-verbal and sensory way, th can also address the viewer in a visually attractive way through the installation of the exhibition.

The increased interest in collective procedures of artistic practice, which we can observe since the early 1990s, is a worldwide phenomenon, often characterised as a “turn from the individual to collective cooperation”.<sup>2</sup> It takes place not only in the form of collaborative art, taking place between artists, curators, and representatives of the art world, but also in a participatory form involving “ordinary” people. The essence lies in the closer relationship between the author and the viewer, as well as in the overall convergence of art and life practice, which is reflected in the content of the artworks, which are frequently long-term projects.

The starting point for understanding the birth of collective cooperation is the observation of changes in the very nature of creative groups – from modernist groupings, which essentially only covered individuals, we mean the transition to building a collective identity. This term includes so-called “engagement” – art in public space, art in the public interest and political art. Examples in the Czech Republic are the groups Póde Bal, Rafaní, Guma Guar or Ztohoven. However, an even higher degree of such authorial collaboration is the community turn, which is linked to the situation of Czech art in the period after the turn of the millennium. It is characterised by the initiative of the artists themselves, who found and run independent galleries and magazines or projects focused on their own artistic community. Projects based on the mere participation of communities outside the artistic sphere appear rather rarely. However, it is precisely in this sphere that the problematic aspects of the so-called “art of cooperation” surface most prominently. Within the framework of ideological activism, these are mainly relations to the institutional background and the art market, or the authority of the artist and his position in relation to other participating subjects. There are also questions about whether such activism often gives rise to mere clientelism, or whether it is correct to promote the work ideologically and directly, when this effort in socialism only brought negative consequences. And whether to present the work in a gallery environment, when the passive participant becomes a spectator again and the artist’s actions cease to be collectively authentic.

However, the field of mediating art is not only within the competence of gallery institutions, the pedagogical and more generally practical creative level plays an important role here. Entering these communication structures, filling them with new content and formulating requirements relies on art education, which by its very nature constitutes a practical creative potential with a general, cultural-educational platform, including curatorial exhibition activity.

2 Jan Zálešák, *Umění spolupráce* (Praha-Brno: VVP AVU, 2011).

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**ART DURING  
THE TRANSITION  
PERIOD**

# MIRROR SCREEN. SUB VOCE & IMAGO – EXHIBITION AT THE MŰCSARNOK / KUNSTHALLE<sup>1</sup>

“We ourselves have become screens”, according to the French theorist Jean Baudrillard. The web of television spanning our entire lives is not something external, it is already inside us. What we see, we see in the same structure as the ‘image’ on the screen and what we think, we think in the visual logic of television. We have abandoned the distinction between the screen and what is outside it: we have become screens ourselves. Our relation to the world is the same as that of the television image: total dependency. If there is a close connection between the screen and reality, then we have something to do with the real; if there is no connection, we do not.

(*Robocop II*: this anthropo-computerized war machine is already equipped with a screen showing a computer animated face instead of a face mask. Is it possible that the film is realistic?)

We are already influenced by photography: we remember faces as photographs, even if we have never seen a photograph of them. We ourselves edit the images of our memory as photographs. Whether the memory image is true or false, we cannot know: the only apparatus for editing our memory images is the apparatus of photography and film. The screen is an extension of the state of photography limited to memory images to everything: we edit everything that is given to us like a screen, because we ourselves are the screens. That which is given: shall we call it reality? To do this, we would need to know what reality is, what the screen is, and what the screen’s relation to reality is: a part of it, its mirror, its counterimage, its version, simulation, substitute, or is it a blank space...? But if Baudrillard’s statement is true, we can hardly decide. Therefore, an exhibition where a plethora of screens are positioned spatially, structurally, conceptually and functionally, situated in positions that are not the usual positions of screens, such an exhibition can only be more than interesting. Evidently, the questions are not just about what we see, but also about who we see, the ones that see all of this, and who we are.

SUB VOCE: video installation is the theme of this year’s exhibition by the Soros Foundation’s Fine Art Documentation Center and the Műcsarnok / Kunsthalles.

<sup>1</sup> The text was originally published in Gábor Bora, “Tükörképernyő – SUB VOCE & IMAGO – kiállítás a Műcsarnokban,” *Filmkultúra*, no. 5 (1991): 52-56. Translated by Dániel Sipos.

Eighteen artists have been invited to create installations. Suzanne Mészöly, the exhibition's curator, was fortunate to be able to combine the Hungarian exhibition with the representative travelling exhibition IMAGO (Fin de Siede in Dutch Contemporary Art), which means more than just an immediate opportunity for international comparison; René Coelho, the curator of the Dutch exhibition, considers its selection principle, i.e. focusing on new technologies and media, to be the last such enterprise. In the future, he will proceed to classify works that also use video under the more traditional categories of installation and sculpture – while the Hungarian exhibition is the first of its kind in terms of magnitude and representativeness; it is therefore more fitting to consider the two exhibitions together as a thematic exhibition of installations and sculpture, rather than as a genre-specific show. The new technologies, such as video, are more a theme than the genre of the exhibition, and accordingly, this theme is about the artistic use of video and, to some extent, computerisation, rather than about a genre.

The actual or virtual presence of screens and computer technology as a theme is therefore more than a problem of genre: among other things, it opens up trains of thought such as the one I have outlined above. The theme is the relationship between the installation, the sculpture, the screen as an object – and that which is displayed on screen itself, the status of the immaterial “image” of the screen in a space laid out by material effects: the status of the immaterial image in general.

More concretely: works that use new technologies inevitably, but often deliberately, revisit the ancient metaphysical dualism of body and soul, which is more than adequately justified by the disembodied, non-physical nature of the “image” on the screen. In fact, the spiritualisation of the screen's cold light beyond the immateriality of the “image” is almost inevitable: as a signifier this “image” is positioned as far away as possible down the chain of signifiers from the universe of those that can be engaged in processes of sign formation. Gradual backtracking to an elementary sign-denoted relation not only seems absurdly complicated, but the tactics required to backtrack to this point are also uncertain. The path to follow is more of transcendence, radicalisation, taking a leap into the unknown: the suspension of the body-soul duality, the redesign of the body by a bio-cybernetic soul. Arbitrary construction of reality instead of attempted deep archaeological excavation through the myriad layers of description accumulated over millennia, translating things into signs. (What would turn up? Knowledge? Energy? Instincts? How would we know that we have reached the bottom layer? From the fact that we went too far and perhaps oil is surging to the surface...?) It remains to be seen whether this perspective is illusory, but the fact that it is frightening is proven by countless fantasy monsters. To see the unfolding horizon as encouraging, not only epistemological, but also ontological optimism, is required.

More concretely: will the cold immateriality of the screen, functioning as a soul, succeed in giving a new level of existence to the space delineated by the installation, to the physical matter present as sculpture? What characterizes characterises the level of existence thus created? More concretely: there is no more concretely; the cold “image” on the screen is anything but concrete – all that can happen is situation, concretisation.

The spiritualisation of the immaterial screen is a sociological fact; think of the classic placement of the television set in the interior spaces we call home: it is almost always the most sheltered, most intimate corner, which was once the designated place of the home altar. An instinctive substitution, almost retrograde, of the magical worldview as TV screen in the place of the Christian worldview (this is to be understood concretely). Magical position: how different this is from the installation of the telephone in the hallway – just as we do not bring the doorbell into our living



rooms, the telephone, as the link to the outside world (until it became its substitute introduced into the bedroom) was originally placed close to this outside world. Péter Forgács has built an ironic corner with his magic furniture. *Hungarian Video Kitchen Art* summons the past (the dawn of the new Middle Ages?). It is no longer necessary to place the TV set in a sanctuary position, the worldview of secondary magic has been embedded into it, and so it does not require spatial confirmation. The irony is in the transformation of the cultic position into the profane institution of an exhibition.

Positions, being featured in space: in some of the works on display, the emphasis is not so much on what is displayed on the screen, but rather its presence or the vacuum of this presence. In András Ravasz and Péter Szarka's installation (joint 1st prize), translucent drum surfaces represent the screens (the only screen actually present is placed behind such a surface, displaying random programming). The work is an auditory redefinition of visual interactivity, where interactivity is represented by a microphone that reflects the amplified noise of our footsteps as drum beats. The visible work functions as an audible one, which, in a space oversaturated with visual functions, receives surprising emphases as an auditory metaphor for the interactive principle that transforms the spectator.

The chief guiding principle behind the SUB VOCE exhibition is the principle of interactivity, the active involvement of the viewers or making them part of the work, but the originally media-critical or media-analytical principle has mostly given way to such apparatuses that directly bring into play (or sometimes confuse) the viewer's identity, as mechanisms exploiting narcissism, the works take the viewer/participant down a regressive path to the very "mirror stage": self-identity as identity with something alien, identity as external, as difference. Who is the "image" and what is the viewer? Such questions are posed, for example, by János Sugár's *Minus Pathos, Plus Myth*, which works as a negative interaction, as a mirror in which we cannot see ourselves (minus pathos). The camera-sculpture placed in one room and aimed at figures on the wall, is projected, along with its environment (i.e. its spectators), onto the drawn contours of the projected installation in another room. As a result of this contour drawing, the people standing in front of the installation become screens, they are in between the same surface (the plus myth, the myth of the "image"), their status, their authenticity, thereby becoming uncertain. The work *Painted Dado* by Csaba Nemes (joint 1st prize), which can be described as interpassivity, achieves a similar effect. Recorded by the cameras, the "painted dado" (the green layer of oil paint, the off-orange separating strip, the white surface) is displayed on monitors embedded in the wall surface as a continuation of the wall surface. The montage of "real" and "image" in which it becomes undecidable whether the wall imitates the "image" or the "image" imitates the wall. Whoever stands in front of this minimalist apparatus, their 'image' appears on the monitor screen and they may wonder: is the continuation on the monitor or the person standing in front of it the more original, the more real, or rather, one sees oneself as a screen mirror image, a mirror screen. Erika Katalina Pásztor's (2nd prize winner) *Gate* also operates with the effect of blurring or evening out the level of existence: the spectator's camera image becomes part of the projected "image", it becomes unreal, a character in an illusory environment, just like the subject peering as a prizefighter through the hole of a painted photo stand-in back in the day. The spectator becomes Narcissus who glimpses their own camera-image substitution in a projected water surface. In Miklós Peternák's installation, which is an analysis of a work by Miklós Erdély, embedded in a pile of apples, the time-insensitive monitor is inserted in an environment determined by biological processes, broadcasting decay while not taking part in it. In Tamás



Komoróczy's installation – *You must find the world* – the screens gazing with eyes from the surfaces of the equipped “room” actually behave as subjects, while the spectator is confronted with the awkward decision of whether to be the object of these gazes, or to become a “subject” (Who/what is watching whom/what? Who/what is the viewer? Is the world to be found outside or within this closed-loop interaction-simulation?)

The path we have taken leads us towards visual (neo-)existentialism, the once anchored physical, biological, social, spiritual levels of our existence irrevocably blend together, appearing as one in the monitor's image. The Szondi test's three-way vectors of instincts and drives explode (René Reitzema uses – in *The fire* – a triptych of monitor screens, rhythmically alternating bamboo axes with fire-axis and a fire-circle), the subject becomes a series of fractalities, inscribing itself as identical in all levels of existence, but lacking unity. Screens, network – everywhere identical, nowhere itself. László László Révész's monitor triptych behind a grid of linearity (linearity = writing) – *I like the way he walks; I like the way he talks* – shows three different levels of picturality, from drawing to digital 'image', all three fractalized at the level of monitor image (-existence). The inscription of the identical becomes fractalized on the three (+1: monitor) levels, as non-identical – and the non-identical as identical in monitor form. A series of metamorphoses where the previous state is retained, but is also imaged in the new state. Only the ones and zeros of digitality can be the basis behind the myth of the “image”.

A classically existentialist liminality is created by the installation of János Szirtes, with a monitor mounted on each of two tables beyond the tipping point, on one of which a glass falls again and again (Sisyphus!), and on the other, a person makes an also repetitive head movement that either causes the fall or merely simulates being the cause. Effect or illusion? Does the spectator passing between the two monitors (I will not insert the mythological association here) influence the processes or are they influenced by the processes? At once undecidable and calls for a decision. If the spectator passes between the monitors and arrives in Peter Klimó's *Red Space*, then, apart from the obvious political associations, they must regard this red space as a possible space of existence. György Galántai's *Wall* also arrives beyond manifest political content: images of the Berlin Wall on a monitor turned against the wall are reflected in a mirror on the wall. The viewer can only see the reflection from an inconvenient position, from a single point, almost squeezing against the wall; it is a wall that has no sides, no hither and beyond.

Is there a “beyond”? There is one example of the beyond as the appearance of a plus dimension, a shift in the level of existence perceivable on a computer-controlled monitor screen: in *Albert's Ark* – Bill Spinhoven – the activity of the computer is the key. If it is true that the screen instantly transforms whatever is displayed into the past, then this work amplifies the effect: the image recorded by the camera is transmitted to the screen via a computer programmed to behave as a delay-machine, a time-stretcher, the delay increasing in the vertical plane of the screen, from zero to three and a half seconds. The camera shows the spectators in front of the screen and their surroundings, with movements represented in accordance with vertical deceleration. The spectator can see their own movements as they continuously pass, the mirror image shown by the camera becomes a reflection distorted according to the speed of movement, the body of the spectator becomes a bearer of the passing of time, the spectators can glimpse the visualised passing of time in themselves. However, if top-down displacement exceeds the speed of the delay, then something occurs that might cause Albert (Einstein!) to feel uncomfortable in his ark: an object dropped

in front of the camera first appears at the bottom of the screen, then, flying rapidly upwards, catches up with itself in the upper third of the screen. Negative time; the delay becomes a visual simulation of the speed of light. And something indeed becomes visible here that we could otherwise never see, because, if we believe Einstein, the speed of light is a boundary with nothing on the other side; it is an absolute boundary.

There are no absolute boundaries between the SUB VOCE and IMAGO exhibitions, neither in terms of quality nor in terms of thought. Yet, if one is characterised by a shift towards an existentialist direction (path!), then the other is characterised more by a certain emotionality and intimacy, in addition to the fact that the Dutch selection is less concerned with the principle of interactivity and that both exhibitions are marked by a post-conceptualist approach or rather tactic.

**Meaning**, the defining element of conceptual structuredness, takes on a different structural position in a post-conceptual work, becoming the point of departure for the work rather than the terminal element of the structure. It seems that the analytical-deconstructive tendency that was still predominant in the mid-eighties has been replaced by a more affirmative tendency by the nineties, such as an existentialist shift or an emotionalism and intimacy. “Emotion” – being neither meaningful nor intellectual – is the output of an otherwise fully intellectualised cold tactic. This cold tactic also implies calculated effects, calculated emotional effects: it starts from the concept of emotion and translates it into visuality; the effect to be achieved comes before the operation that achieves it. In post-conceptualist tactics, it is very important not to reveal “what it really is about”, because at that moment we find the **meaning** that the tactic wants to avoid. Therefore, intimate post-conceptualism produces works where the emotional “meaning” cannot be delineated. In intellectualising postconceptualism, the emotional “meaning” becomes undecidable, we can only perceive its location, but we cannot read its essence. Thus, the tactic simulates experimentation: its calculated effect is that we are unable to precisely grasp the effect, the “meaning”, even though we perceive it to be **present**; the result is a cognitive aura, somewhat reminiscent of the classical avant-garde – but often it is really nothing more than a **quotation**, rarely providing a new structure to our thinking. This is not a critical remark: if art can take the given as its point of departure, it seems that right now what is given most of all is the possibility of such a structure.) Emotional post-conceptualism evokes indefinable emotional effects that can be both humorous and moving, comical and sad. Cold tactics with heated results.

Take, for example, Giny Voss’ installation *Nature morte* or Lydia Schouten’s *Virus of Sadness*. The former alludes to an action by Joseph Beuys, where he explains the meaning of the images to the corpse of a rabbit. Here, zebra stripes move on a screen enclosed in a cage, and the spectator composed into the piece is a stuffed zebra head outside the cage. The sound effect is the breathing of the zebra. The immaterial movement on the screen and the material lifelessness of the stuffed zebra are superimposed in a montage, while it is not evident where the life sign, i.e. the sound, comes from. The effect is undecidability, being moved by the poignancy of nature in the process of extinction. *Virus of Sadness* operates with faces photographed from American crime news broadcasts on TV, mixing the faces of perpetrators and victims, while the spectator is left not knowing who is one and who is the other. A montage of mutual “exposure”, the mutual loneliness of perpetrator and victim. Márta Fehér’s work, which is an articulation of presence, proximity and distance, can also be considered emotional; the difference is that because it does not operate with predetermined categories, this work seems more authentic.

Nietzsche distinguishes between artists who work from excess and those who work from scarcity, i.e. maximalists and minimalists. Here, this distinction applies more to the works themselves: minimalist works attempt to **represent** oversaturation, hence the emotionality; this, in turn, on account of its indeterminacy, becomes an empty space of emotions, a **moving** demonstration of their absence. Rendering things past and the accelerated consumption of the past – is this past none other than emotions? – having become a screen, humanity shows perhaps the last emotion, the sadness of the abandonment of emotions on its monitor face. A simulation of emotions, or nostalgic sentimentality, or a reminder that there were/are emotions? There is no choice, here intellectual tactics are targeted against themselves...

This brings us back to our point of departure: have we become screens and are we just afraid to admit that we want to become screens, but the decisive step is still ahead of us, or do we not want to become screens and are we looking for the means to articulate the difference? A particular, **decisive** interaction: we must decide for ourselves if there is a difference between the screen and us.

# THE CLASP OF ASPECTS. ART IN CENTRAL EUROPE, 1949–1999

As György Konrád astutely puts it in the catalogue of the *Aspects/Positions* exhibition, “In the eighties, writers, artists and historians in Budapest, Bratislava, Prague, Krakow, Warsaw, Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn needed a concept of Central Europe for our region to be able to break free intellectually from the clasp of the Soviet Union and set its own path...” In the meantime, the historical situation has changed, but the need for Central European initiatives and regional cooperation has not lost its relevance. This is true even if the region’s best known and most respected political and cultural forms, the consultations of the Alps-Adriatic Alliance and the Visegrád Four, have been operating with varying degrees of intensity and effectiveness in recent times. And to not leave visual arts out of the mix, a comprehensive exhibition on this theme has just entered the scene once again after Vienna, Barcelona, Southampton and Prague, now hosted by the Museum of Contemporary Art-Ludwig Museum in Budapest.

For Loránd Hegyi – who, as director of the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig in Vienna, arranged the vast exhibition with his fellow curators – the concept of Central Europe is something already evident. He analyses the typical manifestations of Central Europeanness with great insight in the catalogue: the crisis and multiplication of identity, the overrated ethnicity and the rejection of all that is foreign or new, the romantic sense of history and the morally, emotionally overloaded intelligentsia, etc. He accumulates apt observations, enhances the overall picture with new details, but consistently avoids drawing the historical and geographical boundaries of the region. In all frankness, a peculiar Central Europe is taking shape here. It includes the northern Balkans, Yugoslavia and its successor states (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia), while Romania and Bulgaria, despite forty years of socialist coexistence, are omitted, and the northern and western areas of the Baltic, as well as Germany and Italy, also disappear into the shadows. Only Austria remains as a centre and an organising nucleus, and as such, its intellectual hegemony is not endangered by anything. What is problematic here

1 The text was originally published in Zoltán Nagy, “Nézőpontok csapdájában. Művészet Közép-Európában 1949-1999,” *Kritika*, no. 7 (2000): 24-25. Translated by Dániel Sipos.

is not so much the manner in which Hegyi and his colleagues interpret and delimit the concept of Central Europe, but the failure to explain and justify these aspects.

The area selected for overview is still enormous, however, as is the timeframe of half a century. Whether this great ambition is an advantage or a disadvantage is a matter of opinion. The author of these paragraphs is inclined to think that the exhibition's organisers have set themselves an insurmountable task. There would have been two ways to move away from this impasse; on the one hand, by narrowing down the time frame, perhaps by dividing it into periods, while on the other hand, by focusing on some general aspect, theme or problem. The aforementioned study by Hegyi raises a whole series of the latter, all they should have done was choose one or two. At this point, the catalogue again lacks any guidance: the criteria that guided the selection is not revealed clearly despite the abundance of texts and studies.

The result is a combination of the territorial principle, including each country having its own curator, such as the need for art historical representation, in a non-transparent and alternating proportion, with thematic series of works focusing on a single problem, boldly highlighting and omitting things, condensing and summarising the thematised phenomena. Perhaps it is needless to say that the latter are the most attractive and valuable parts of the exhibition, while the attempt to present the art of each country in isolation is more like the source of an awkward gauntlet, of much objection and resentment. Indeed, the national selections of extremely limited scope keep confronting us with such difficult questions as why this or that artist or phenomenon has been omitted and why another is included. The controversial character of the situation is aggravated by the fact that, looking at the big picture, it is possible to make contradictory claims, such as objections to superfluous details and to the featuring of artists and works of art that digress from the overall process. Is it any wonder then that the exhibition, hovering between the two extremes of territoriality and problem-centeredness, cannot really meet either of these requirements? On the one hand, it can be criticised for the lack of elaborate detail, for being a hodgepodge, a mosaic, for the compilations of a little bit of everything, while on the other hand all of this can be branded as loose, sloppy, or verbose. As such, I will proceed with citing some rather heretical examples. From the perspective of the territorial principle, the inclusion of the modern Polish classics Strzeminski, Stażewski and Kobro is perfectly justified, as is the room of 1948 Neoplasticism. However, from the other aspect, it would be just as easy to ignore them, and the same can be said of the works of Wotruba, Hrdlicka and Hundertwasser. The Hungarian selection seems to be more rigorous, but the ambiguity makes it difficult to say whether this is a positive or a negative attribute. It abandons the European School without a second thought and, with the exception of a work by Tibor Vilt from 1949, essentially starts with the 1960s.

These general objections do not rule out the possibility of enjoying the exhibition and the works on display in detail. Katalin Néray's excellent organisation has a great role in this, as she has tried as best as possible to make this monstrous mass of artworks clearly structured and transparent. The museum's permanent exhibition has been dismantled for the occasion, so that the exhibition occupies all three floors of exhibition space. To adapt to the dimensions of the space, the large-scale installations have been placed on the ground floor, while the exhibition actually starts on the second floor. But it is not unwise to deviate from the chronological order, plunging into the thick of Central European art without any preparation or introduction. Magdalena Jetelova's brutally carved giant sculpture of wood beams, Imre Bukta's and Péter Forgács' installations using the motif of the pig rightly gave us the feeling



that the voice of deep Hungary – the provinces far from the intellectual centres, the countryside – had been heard. In contrast, there was civilised, globalised “modernity”, with its bizarre, distorted body culture on the one hand, and its easy-to-consume kitsch drizzled with sweet syrup on the other. Zbigniew Libera’s *Universal Penis Expander*, Elke Krystufek’s photographic exploration of her body and soul, face and gender, and Markus Muntean and Adi Rosenblum’s “virgin girl” installation seemed to be different manifestations of this phenomenon. There are also other examples illustrated, such as by the “trifles” hiding in the shadows of the large-scale works, an embroidery by Emese Benczúr, or the material and object-based transpositions of form by Róza El-Hassan and János Sugár.

By working our way through the pieces on the rest of the levels, we were also confronted with the antecedents of the use of the human body as an artistic medium. Teresa Murák’s nude in a cloak of vegetation seemed like a metamorphosis worthy of Ovid’s pen, while the nude and action photographs of the eminent performer Marina Abramovic illustrated the slogan “Art should be beautiful! The artist should be beautiful!” to the letter. Meanwhile, Nesa Paripovic’s naked woman scanned by male lips was posited as an analytical sculpture. For the Viennese actionists, the human body represented something quite different as a medium: painful and brutal acts, profane ritual and street scandal, the mysterious spectacle of men covered in bandages from head to toe. Hermann Nitsch, whom we could see last year at the Museum Kiscell, was now joined by Otto Muehl, Günter Brus, Rudolf Schwarzkogler and Tibor Hajas. They seemed to belong together, despite the fact that Hajas started his career a decade and a half later than the Viennese, who began in the sixties. The last exhibit in this section was Arnulf Rainer’s poignant repainted death-masks.

Over the past half century, artists in Central Europe have been provided a point of departure and framework for their work by the great dominant tendencies of world art, often invented far away from us, on other continents. It was up to them whether they could manage these impulses, how they could transform them into their own image, as did Dezső Korniss, Rainer, Bozickovic-Popovic with Abstract Expressionism and Informel, or László Lakner, György Jovánovics, Jozef Jankovic, Karel Nepras with Pop art and New Realism. A generous series of artworks at the exhibition by Imre Bak, István Nádler, Ilona Keserü, Tamás Hencze, Julije Knifer, Radomir Damnjanovic Damnjan and Stanislav Kolibal also fit into this trend. They feature geometric forms, rhythms of colour and abstract shapes stretching the traditional confines of this framed image, setting out into the world of meta-art beyond the isolation of traditional genres, using moulded canvas, optical effects and other material supplements.

The visitor was also confronted with different types and qualities of expression of the postmodern restart. Prominently placed alongside eraser paintings and photo use, neo-geo and ornamental carpet-like object, were well-known works by László Fehér, Ákos Birkás and Attersee, and a revelatory video installation (*Cross by the Baltic Sea*, 1988) by András Koncz’s. However, the true central theme was provided by the works of political concern in the upper regions of the exhibition – illustrative and not as easily accessible, garish and more restrained pieces. Violent turns in history and politics interfering in private life are a fundamental feature of the Central European region – the directors believe. Perhaps that is why the motifs of violent death, prison, confinement and disaster returned so prominently here. The paintings of Andrzej Wróblewski and Béla Kondor, Tibor Vilt and Magdalena Abakanowicz’s *Cage*, István Harasztý’s *Birdcage*, Erzsébet Schaár’s female figure standing in front of and behind a wall, Oswald Oberhuber’s balloon wreck all spoke of existential vulnerability in their own way and means. The younger generations

treated political motifs in a very different way, such as with courageous confrontation, acknowledgement (Sándor Pinczehelyi: *Sickle and Hammer*) or mockery (Dusán Otasevió: *Comrade Tito is our white violet*). In conclusion, the portrait of the leader was replaced by a giant photo of the everyday passer-by (Braco Dimitrijevic), and the plaster head of the President of the Republic was placed next to the garden gnome (Milan Knížák: *Czech Landscape*). “What courage!” – one could remark under one’s breath.

There was a great deal in this exhibition and a great deal that was left out. There was a conspicuous lack of confrontation with the socialist art of the fifties. Without that, the whole historical process took place in a vacuum.



# ARE WE ONE OF THE SELF- COLONISING NATIONS?

GÁBOR  
HUSHEGYIVLADIMÍR  
BASKID

“Notes on the Self-Colonising Cultures”, a translation of an article by the Bulgarian theoretician Alexander Kiossev, was published in 2008 in *Profil*, a Slovak journal of contemporary visual art. This text evoked intensive discussion after it was included in the catalogue of the exhibition *After the Wall. Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe* (Modern Museum, Stockholm 1999). The same issue of *Profil* carried a questionnaire where Slovak critics discuss the validity of Kiossev’s theory. Kiossev proceeded from the premise that, in contrast to the violent history of transoceanic colonisation, the self-colonising cultures are those which “themselves import foreign (Western) values and civilisation models, and via these foreign models colonise their authenticity, and do that with love”.

Jana Geržová: historian and art critic, editor-in-chief of *Profil* journal of contemporary visual art

The key problem that Alexander Kiossev focuses on in his “Notes on the Self-Colonising Cultures” (1995) has to do with the adoption of the western model of civilisation and its implementation in a non-western cultural context. Kiossev takes his departure from the specific situation of Bulgaria, which is geographically part of the Balkans. Bulgarian culture during the period studied, as compared to Czech and Slovak art, was more isolated from Western affairs. And in relation to the West, Bulgarian culture more conspicuously posited the negative categories “Them”, “The Others.” We must therefore pose the question of which elements of his theory of self-colonising cultures can we apply to our engagement, not just with modernism, but with Western culture and Western art history as such?

We could begin with an elementary question, whether the art created in our countries falls into the category of non-Western culture. In specifying this concept, will we hold fast to the stringent definition of James Elkins, who believes that every culture and art that is “dependent on basic Western narratives”<sup>1</sup> is non-Western – meaning

1 James Elkins, “Prečo nie je možné napísať dejiny umenia nezápadných kultúr? / Why Is It Not Possible to Write the Art History of Non-Western Cultures?,” in *Minulosť v prítomnosti: Súčasné umenie a umeleckohistorické mýty / The Past in the Present: Contemporary Art*

that the periodisation of the art history of this or that country, and the concepts and descriptions used when interpreting domestic artists' work, are based on the canonised western art history? Or will we proceed from historical explorations of our Central European cultural space, where the polarity of centre versus periphery has been the preferred alternative to that of Western versus non-Western culture (and this from the time of the Romanesque, if not earlier)? Can we apply the findings of the long-continued historical analyses of the phenomenon of the periphery, and not only pre-1989<sup>2</sup> but also post-1989,<sup>3</sup> to the period of modernism, or to the current cultural situation?

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On the introductory question, I would definitely be inclined towards the second variant of interpretation, i.e. the polarity of centre and periphery. This more precisely expresses the relationship of Central European culture and art with the great centres, and it is not just a question of our region only but also, for example, the northern and Baltic countries. J. Szücs, in an excellent study of *Three Historical Regions of Europe* (*Tri historické regióny Európy*, Kalligram, 2001), provides us with sufficient arguments for our anchorage in the West over the past thousand years. And indeed, the past two decades have shown that our 20th century art is much less interesting for the West than the art of exotic countries, which often proceeds from a different religious and cultural tradition, from a different definition of the image and its portrayal, than our own Judaeo-Christian one. We may identify this lack of interest as, among other things, surprise at the discovery that our Czech and Slovak art was more or less able to respond to the topical questions even during the four decades of communism. Hence, as Kiossev shows, for the West our culture is 'insufficiently foreign, insufficiently remote, and insufficiently backward'. From today's standpoint, we may say that there has been continuity here, even if with interruptions, thanks to the unofficial scene, which impeded the total transformation of our visual art into folklore. At a remove of two decades, and also with the perspective of a Balkan writer who geographically and anthropologically has more detachment, Kiossev's article provides a space for a critical revaluation of our attitude to the two-voiced history of art.

**Vladimír Beskid:** historian, critic, and curator of visual art, and director of the Ján Koniarek Gallery in Trnava. He is engaged in researching modern and contemporary art, with emphasis on the relationship between painting and the technical image, as well as iconographic themes in modern visual culture, focusing on analysis of the influence of dominant ideas and ideologies on art.

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& *Art History's Myths*, ed. Ján Bakoš (Bratislava: Nadácia – Centrum súčasného umenia, 2002), 230.

2 In Slovakia the centre-periphery relation in the historical context has been studied intensively by Ján Bakoš, "Región, periféria a umeleckohistorický vývoj," *Romboid* 12 (1987); ———, *Periféria a symbolický skok* (Bratislava: Kalligram, 2000), 135–50.

3 E.g. XXVI AICA Congress "Center and Periphery" in 1992 in Vienna; in Slovakia e.g. The International Symposium "Centrum – okraj? Elita – priemer" [Centre – Margin? Elite – Median] in 1999 in Trnava.

First and foremost, I do not regard Kiossev's text as a significant contribution to the theme of colonisation; it suffers too much from the traditional ills of woefulness, self-traumatisation and self-pity. It demonstrates the immaturity of the current intellectual elite, not the immaturity of the cultures as such. It is reminiscent of the situation where the frog sees a horse being shod and raises his leg. Simply, we are not like them. We are not "Westerners", at most we're Western within the Slavic world. We want awfully to be like them, we want them to love us, but Western civilisation calmly goes on producing ever more, colonising ever more, and it won't resolve our complexes. Personally, my preference is for the concept of Central European cultural identity, being on the frontier between Rome and Byzantium as well as needing to define it, rather than "inserting ourselves" into the western context.

**Jana Geržová:** Do you think that being situated on the periphery could be strategically more significant than being assigned to the context of non-Western culture, which is associated with total exclusion from the history of Western culture? Today, in the age of globalisation, can we specify more exactly the differences between non-Western culture and the culture of the periphery, or do we find more similarities here which are based on a common denominator, that being the extent to which they are disregarded on the Western side?

**Gábor Hushegyi:** Europe, and indeed even its national states, are not homogeneous. The polarity of centre and periphery is therefore more an awareness of cultural differences between more mature, less mature, and more backward regions in Europe, or in individual states. In terms of the functioning of art, today it would be more advantageous to belong to the context of non-Western culture, but that would introduce the conflict of the gaze of "the Other" and established art would be regarded as an authentic impoverished folklorisation, at best an epigone version of the mainstream. However, we should be aware that if we truly belonged to the domain of non-Western culture, today we would not be seeking parallels between Kiossev's theory and our interwar and postwar modernism. In the context of his theory, we may focus on the following question: for the unofficial scene, was it self-colonisation to follow conceptualism and action art? Wasn't self-colonisation instead rather the continuation of the art of socialism, i.e. engaged art by those artists who were actively in the service of power? While the Bulgarian writer does not deal with this, it may be that he would see the second type as classic colonisation, but from our knowledge of the 1970s we know that there were also other, oppositional strategies. Hence, not only acceptance of the Western mainstream, but also succumbing to the demand for engaged art, might be designated by the concept of self-colonisation. And immediately, we find ourselves in the situation where, based on our experience, we transpose the writer's self-colonisation not to the "Europeanisation" but to the "sovietisation" of our visual art.

**Vladimír Baskid:** We needn't rush to remove ourselves to the periphery of some cultural bloc, or to be outside its framework. There's a need for more perspective, following broader time

planes (not only through the optics of the modern era), and more sensitivity to a different model of culture. We've got a differently built skeleton, a different construct of culture; maybe the time that passed here was different, the entire cultural organism evolved otherwise. In this Central European space, we have registered the ebbs and flows of western and eastern waves, and precisely the moment of transformation, interpretation of the adopted patterns, symbols, or entire iconographic systems, may be our strong suit. That is to say, the provincialising, rusticising process may be perceived as an important creative impulse and our contribution to the European cultural archive.

**Jana Geržová:** Connected with the varying forms of dependence on western culture, there's another part of Kiossev's theory which is problematic, in terms of our cultural specificities. Defining the category of self-colonising cultures, the author argues: "in such cultures the social and symbolic 'order for modernity' is not carried out through the violent colonisation whereby European colonists conquer and destroy the original culture and exterminate or enslave the original population (as in the case of the American Indians, or some primitive cultures in Africa)(...) It appears to me that the self-colonising cultures themselves import foreign values and civilisation models, and via these foreign models they colonise their authenticity, and they do it with love." To what extent can we apply his interpretation of the adoption of modernism, in the sense of colonisation and self-colonisation, to our situation? Could we not distinguish between the negative phenomenon of colonisation, which in our context is associated rather with the forced importation of socialist realism in the 1950s, and again in the 1970s, and a positive phenomenon of self-colonisation, which may be interpreted as conscious identification with a cultural model of which we feel we are part? And is self-colonisation possible at all without a colonisation that precedes it?

**Gábor Hushegyi:** The merit of the article in question is the critical mode of thinking about the author's own culture, art and nation, by bringing an anthropological perspective to bear. Perhaps many will not agree with this, but I sense that the author feels a certain shame at his own national culture in its complex form. He has made an outstanding attempt, a model effort, to capture the process of establishment of modern national cultures in the Balkans. However, if we look at the formulated problem from a universal standpoint, according to which the uncritical, indeed warm reception of "an expanding universalist ideology of foreigners" is a sign that "these cultures simply did not exist before this confusion – through it, they came into being", then we have a problem that is relevant to all national states and nations which (in today's sense of the term "nation") were constituted during the 19th century. Everywhere in Central Europe, generations of nation-builders appealed to "the absence of some concrete success of civilisation", or they belaboured the wretched living conditions and backwardness, lagging the more developed nations of Europe (in the case of pre-1918 Hungary, Count Ferenc Széchenyi). The question is whether we experience this fact as a trauma, as

“a painful deficiency of basic substance and universality” and, of course, as self-colonisation? Personally, I do not experience this as a problem, but I do see it as a theoretical and intellectual challenge because I cannot agree with the author in marginalising the economic aspects of contemporary culture’s evolution. To stagnate on the level of authenticity of the national culture of the 19th century, or alternatively to modify it autochthonously, is problematic. More than that, until the mid-1980s Slovak art historiographers were claiming that art history on the territory of present-day Slovakia was autochthonous and self-contained – which is nonsense, as Ján Bakoš demonstrated theoretically. The final questions in Kiossev’s article offer a solution, in their declamatory fashion: yes, “the history of the modern movement should not be written as a history compounded from the histories of the many individual nations (...) rather, it ought to be written (...) globally, as the history of the entire process of asymmetric modernisation.” The pitfalls of this theory, to my mind, are the author’s defeatist platform, and furthermore his prolongation of the habit of thinking in the contexts of national states, which both in his case and our case I regard as one of the conspicuous relics of the previous regime. This theory is not mechanically applicable to our milieu; in the centuries gone by we have, after all, taken a different course in history, economics, culture, and art. Let us not forget the good fortune we had, of avoiding domination by the Ottoman Empire, and the fact that the Habsburg monarchy, for all its faults, had an extremely positive influence on our West European affinity for over four centuries. Kiossev himself, in one of his more recent articles, draws attention to domestic culinary specialities and hero-figures in the Balkans and gives a striking account of differences in the reactions of people from this region (even when they live for a longer or shorter time outside their homelands, in the West for example), as compared with the behaviour of English, French, Germans etc. I assume therefore that the author himself would steer clear of simple comparisons. However, I see a problem if I look at this from the standpoint of Bulgarian art. The new generation, in not insignificant numbers, has acquired artistic education outside the homeland, for example in Austrian and German art academies, where the number of students from Bulgaria is conspicuously higher than the numbers from Central Europe! Which is to say, following the mainstream need not be in every instance a sign of the “Westernisation” of Bulgarian culture, or an individual manifestation of the “trauma of global absence”. In our case, I see a parallel with the official art of the 1950s, but here we ought to speak of classical colonisation. Again, we could apply the term self-colonisation to the official art of the 1970s and 1980s.

**Jana Geržová:** In terms of ideas about cultural colonisation and self-colonisation, Slovak culture has one peculiarity, stemming from the historical coexistence of Czech and Slovak culture in the framework of a single state. On the one hand, there



is a certain dependence of Slovak art on Czech culture and its traditions; on the other hand, there is an unceasing attempt to be emancipated from such dependence. This became intensive, for example, in the 1960s (when a federative system for Czechoslovakia was in preparation), caused by a certain underestimation of Slovak culture and the patronising approach of the Czech representatives towards the autonomy of Slovak art. In this connection, may we think in terms of colonisation and self-colonisation? May we actually reference the call by Vladimír Kompánik, published in *Private Correspondence of the Mikuláš Galanda Group*, as an effort at decolonisation? “You, as a brother, respect me as a brother! I want to sleep here the same as you, maybe on a worse bed or with a smaller vent, but in my space. Because no other development is possible. We are the way we are. I hope we’ve paid the debt well enough, in gratitude for your support. But we don’t want to follow you any longer according to your ideas. Be considerate of our ideas and have respect for them.”<sup>4</sup>

Gábor Hushegyi: I would extend the thesis of colonisation and self-colonisation to the Germans and Austrians in the case of the Czechs, and the Hungarians in the case of the Slovaks. Needless to say, this is an open series, and we may extend it as the need arises, e.g. with the Hungarians’ fear of German and Austrian artistic and cultural colonisation in the 19th century, or Hungarians’ fear of Czech cultural and artistic colonisation during the first Czechoslovak Republic. A common feature of these fears is the absence of something that the other party had already created for itself (for example art institutions, an artistic life, art periodicals, etc.); alongside this we see, logically, an attempt at self-emancipation. Probably we should not call the casting of colonialism a self-colonisation, rather we should acknowledge a notable step towards institutionalisation of artistic activity in the context of the “elder brother.” A structured network of institutions is actually the basis for a functioning artistic activity and a pluralist art scene: that is true of the relation of Czechs and Germans, Slovaks and Czechs, but also of Hungarians in the Czechoslovak Republic and Slovaks, and this is what we might call decolonisation. Actual self-colonisation may follow only after the constitution of a certain “common factor,” which can be subjected to betrayal, corruption, or conquest by foreign influences. And this is precisely where I detect a certain discrepancy in Kiossev: following West European artistic models is self-colonisation, rejecting them is maintaining authenticity. In visual art the national and linguistic borders are easily permeable, and therefore these influences have a more conspicuous intensity of oscillation, and for this very reason, such thoughts or fears are entirely groundless, and our discussion should be about the positions in contemporary visual art and those which persistently set up barriers against these contemporary trends.

Vladimír Beskid: This chapter of the “soft colonisation” of Slovak culture in former Czechoslovakia is bypassed in silence, and I think that in the very near future we are going to have to “walk it

4 Juraj Mojžiš, ed., “Súkromné listy” *Skupiny Mikuláša Galandu* (Bratislava: 1968), 3.

through.” There are unaddressed problems of the functioning of institutions, finance, and representation under Czech auspices – e.g. the removal of precious discoveries and monuments to Prague (the Gánovce endocast) – or the obscuration of Slovak art in the Czechoslovak context (even up to the present, e.g. the exhibition *Reduktionismus (Abstraktion in Polen, Tschechoslowakei, Ungarn 1950 – 1980)*, mumok Vienna 1992, without a single Slovak artist participating). On the other hand, we must give due credit also to the enormous investment of the Czech artistic elite in the profiling of Slovak art (Bohuslav Fuchs, Vladimír Karfík, Maria Bartuszová, Milan Dobeš, Václav Mencl and Dobroslava Menclová etc.).

**Jana Geržová:** In the conclusion of his text, Kiossev analyses numerous modes by which the described cultures come to terms with the traumatic circumstances of their origin and existence. One of these, which Kiossev calls Westernisation or Europeanisation “represents historical temporality in a simplified form – as a ‘sporting’ competition, as a race, where underdevelopment in ‘civilisation’” may be relieved by a ‘sprint’ of enlightenment. This doctrine has the pseudo-universality of the ‘progressivist’ doctrine that measures the value of life by the quantity of ‘successes of civilisation’.” Another mode, which he designates as nativism, is characterised as a doctrine “which seeks and often finds (i.e. invents) a lost authentic basis of the ‘nation’, as it was before foreigners corrupted it, and then idealises this in the bucolic mode. Needless to say, this doctrine fights against any new corrupting influences and engenders the most vehement nationalist ideologies and a dangerous sacralisation of the ‘native’.” Do you agree with Kiossev that both therapeutic models are “competitive, conflictual and deluded”? Wasn’t Europeanisation valued more positively in our milieu than so-called nativism?

**Gábor Hushegyi:** The three modes of rationalisation of a traumatic culture as conceived by Kiossev are thought-provoking, in my view, even though I do not consider the acute polarity of the second mode of realisation, i.e. Westernisation and nativism, to be the fundamental problem of Czech and Slovak visual art. In the case of modernism, in the early years of the 20th century, this cannot justifiably be thematised as self-colonisation, given that artists from our region – Czechs as well as Hungarians, and also artists from the territory of present-day Slovakia (Lajos Kassák, Lajos Kudlák, etc.) – were involved in the birth of the international Avant-garde. More interesting are the positions between two fields, precisely those classicising positions of visual art that became typical of the new countries in the region after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. I would be more inclined to see a powerful “nativising” influence on modern art in Austria, as well as in Poland and the First Czechoslovak Republic. The art of the 1920s and 1930s gives thorough proof of the interpenetration of these two attitudes, neither radical avant-garde nor musty 19th century, but something between the two, with a preservation of national authenticity. I would devote a special chapter to Hungary, where Avant-garde art comes to have a lower status, and in the mid-1920s a national variant of the Italian *novecento* (*Scuola*



*romana*) became established. Without colonisation, the official doctrine of art turns towards Mussolini's Italy, and accordingly, in the spirit of Kiossev's theory, we might call the position of Count Kun Klebelsberg, minister of culture, and Tibor Gerevich, chief ideologue of the new trend in visual art, a self-colonisation. And likewise those artists who aligned themselves with the official position, as in Hungary between the wars, there were other available artistic strategies besides serving the official cultural policy. However, also of interest in Kiossev's conception is the first mode of rationalisation of trauma. This is objectified in the national constructs of art history; in our case, it relates to the theory of continuity between the Great Moravian Empire and contemporary Slovakia, but myths are also created after the birth of national culture and art (see the preconception of a "Generation 1909"). I would also draw attention to Kiossev's "third sublimative rationalisation of the birth trauma", which is closely associated with the first mode of rationalisation, especially in its distortion of binary oppositions as prime sources of exclusive and intolerant, closed and nationalistic preconceptions and myths in art history.

**Vladimír Beskid:** I cannot agree with Kiossev either in regards to the two approaches being deluded, or with his approach. Even the very concept of "nativism" comes loaded with a heavy freight of Westernisation. Precisely the use of western concepts and the adaptation of our history to their measure is, in my opinion, one of the main stumbling-blocks in writing our history. It is not possible to express our specific features in their grid, with their conceptual vocabulary. We can find the two trends in question in every community, in every nation and culture. Each one creates its indispensable archive of "authoritative" images and concepts, and on the other hand proves its maturity by the degree of "cultural metabolism" – exchange of ideas, symbols, and objects with other communities. It's just a question of proportion, the appropriate mix or balance of lack of sophistication and cosmopolitanism. Preventing a one-sided and "solely correct" vision of the world (the lesson of totalitarian systems in Slovakia). It is always a question of establishing a doctrine of the present time – likewise today, after the doctrine that all frost comes from the Kremlin, we are dazzled by the vision that all light comes from the dollar bill. The imposition and hyper-valuation of "Europeanisation" gives weaker souls a more powerful feeling of world-belonging than the acknowledgement of roots and distinctive tradition.

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# SUSPECTED OR IMAGINED AUTHORITIES<sup>1</sup>

(SHORTENED)

[...]

By any standards, the three artists from Grupa Ładnie [Nicely Done Group]<sup>2</sup> have achieved a phenomenal success, since Wilhelm Sasnal, Marcin Maciejowski and Rafał Bujnowski are currently at the top of the international art scene.

Sasnal has his place with Saatchi and at the Tate Modern, in London. His works were included in Saatchi's exhibition, *The Triumph of Painting*, last year, and the title of that exhibition alone is an indicator of his achievement. Maciejowski is represented by the Meyer Keiner Gallery – one of the best in Vienna – and had a one-man show at the Mark Fox Gallery in Los Angeles. Bujnowski is also quite busy with international exhibitions and residencies. The news on these artists' life and art is widely available on the internet.

I would like to discuss how Poland's young artists, including Grupa Ładnie, managed to achieve such a measure of critical and financial success, at the very time when the impact of globalism on the art scene began to make itself felt<sup>3</sup>. What does the expression of Polishness have to do with the recent success of Polish visual art? And what caused the critics to change their mind, when the conventional view, up until then, had been that "Polishness" was synonymous with provincialism? What have the changes in Polish culture, society and government over the last few years contributed to this change in attitude? For me, the key question has to do with the role of art history in that process. As we already know, one kind of art history is constructed in museums, classrooms and textbooks, and another is inscribed in everyday practice. Are we justified in seeing the latter as a kind of know-how, or tool kit, for the young artist?

1 The text was originally published in Maria Hussakowska, "Suspected or Imagined Authorities," in *From Art School to Professional Practice. Proceedings of the seminars held in Dublin, Copenhagen, Valencia, Athens*, ed. Paul Devautour and Henry Meyric Hughes (AICA Press and ensa\_bourges, 2008) and then reprinted in *Krótką historią Grupy Ładnie*, ed. Dominik Kuryłek Magdalena Drągowska, Ewa Tatar (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!Art, 2008), 204-05.

2 According to Marcin Maciejowski, the name was derived from the reaction of a professor at the Fine Art Academy during a showing of his paintings. "He stood before my work, looked at it and in order generally to say anything (because he really had to give out some sort of correction) he said "Yes, OK. Nicely done". Rafał Bujnowski was probably the first one to notice this. This is how the name became a reality.

3 The prices are up to 400,000 euros for Maciejowski, and over 100,000 USD for Sasnal at Christies (as of 2007).

The story of Grupa Ładnie has a great many art historical links. Marcin Maciejowski (b. 1974), Wilhelm Sasnal (b. 1972) and Rafal Bujnowski (b. 1974) met when all three were studying architecture at Cracow's Polytechnic. Two years later, they left the Polytechnic, and by 1996 three of them began studying at the Academy of Fine Arts. Here, they embarked on a hectic bohemian life (or something akin to this) and regularly consorted with other artists, such as Marek Firek and Jozef Tomczyk Kurosawa, who exemplified Warhol's dictum about everyone's entitlement to a quarter of an hour of fame, in a small city the size of Kraków. One way or another, these informal encounters led to discussions about a common project and the idea of founding an artists' group, to give substance to the modernist strategies they had learned about. The name of the group came about more or less by accident.

The Grupa Ładnie quickly became known to a circle of young art historians. Joanna Zielińska, who initiated the Koło Gallery in 1996, along with a number of fellow students of art history, lived in the same small city as Rafał Bujnowski. Joanna Zielińska and Malgorzata Tomczyk ran the gallery in a cellar on Grodzka Street, where the Institute of Art History at Jagiellonian University is located. The second event at the Koło Gallery was Bujnowski's action, "Grafika Gratis", during which every person who came to see the exhibition was presented with an original piece of art. The next event was a show, for which Maciejowski had painted, just on the previous day, a group of five pictures on the Polish sportsmen's victory at Wembley. The depictions of triumph on the football pitch were as ephemeral as the triumph itself, as the artist himself destroyed most of the freshly painted pictures in the course at the opening. Sasnal had his first exhibition in the gallery one year later. Thus, it can be said that these art history students were the people who first "made" Grupa Ładnie.

Grupa Ładnie worked out a strategy for drawing attention to themselves. The first step in this was to consolidate the membership of the Group and provide it with an attractive name, and the second was to create the art magazine, *Słynne pismo we wtorek* [Tuesday's Famous Publication]. They also published manifestos, artwork editions and put out biographical information that was, in part, a deliberate attempt at mystification – all, with the aim of creating a nonchalant image for Grupa Ładnie.

They were doing all this in a rather special context, as the second half of the 1990s was an interesting time for Krakow, when new clubs and pubs were opening, one after the other, and succeeded in attracting not only a great number of artists, but artists of different generations. The artists treated some of these clubs almost as their own living-rooms, and the wall paintings by, for example, Marcin Maciejowski at clubs such as Miasto Krakoff or Piękny Pies fitted in perfectly.

At the same time, Grupa Ładnie succeeded in constructing a sense that there was, as it were, an imaginary group of individuals. The concept of the avant-garde, as a kind of community, was currently a topic of art historical debate. Historically, the avant-garde had constituted marginal groups operating within the community, but always trying to push out the boundaries. In this instance, Grupa Ładnie realised that the time for boundaries had arrived. It did not take long, therefore, for someone to define Maciejowski's painting, for example, as "painterly journeys on the peripheries and at the margins".<sup>4</sup>

Grupa Ładnie's strategy, "from zero to hero", was, therefore, successfully realised, with a little help from the (group's art historian) friends. "Popelita" ("Pop elite" – very attractive because it's an oxymoron) won out, because, in the words of Karpinska, one of the art historians connected with the Koło Gallery, now at the Zderzak Gallery:

4 Goschka Gawlik, "To a Hollow. Painterly Journeys, on the Peripheries and at the Margins," in Maciejowski. *Dziupla/Schlupfloch/Stasch* (Białystok: Galeria Arsenal, 2004).

“The public at that time was ready for something that caught their eye, something that was attractive. They were ready for art to be presented to them as a product. We, in Poland, lost Pop Art, but we already knew how to manage the new post-modern version”. Cheeky irony was in common, everyday use inside the communities. Within one year, the artists were represented by the Zderzak Gallery (a small, private, respected gallery) and shown widely around Poland. The show POPelita at the Bunkier Sztuki Gallery (2001) exhibited a new generation of Polish artists, as Małgorzata Tomczyk noted in the catalogue. The apposite title, POPelita, that an art critic had attached to some of the group’s work, was well-suited to their ambitions to become famous, well-paid artists, with a good sense of the “Zeitgeist”. Here, perhaps, we can share Carol Duncan’s view, that: “we must also recognize that great artists, like star baseball players, appear in the context designed to produce and discover them. Selected from among hundreds of competitors, those who become visible are those whose talents best accord with the demands of the game.”<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to the art of 1980s, which often had to be discretely exhibited in small private galleries, Grupa Ładnie focused largely on public/outdoor art. It became normal to exhibit in unusual locations, such as on concrete slabs within blocks of flats. The Open Gallery, which ran from 1998 to 2000 and was sponsored by AMS Company, Poland’s largest advertising group, realized the idea of a gallery that would be open twenty-four hours a day.

By the mid-90s, it became clear that something in the Polish art scene would need to change, if it were to stand any chance of coming to the attention of a national and international public.

Unsurprisingly, the next move came from abroad. Goschka Gawlik, a freelance curator based in Vienna, who had studied art history in Cracow in the 1970s decided to show Marcin Maciejowski in a group exhibition, *Dobrze /In Ordnung*, at Vienna’s Kunstbüro during the Polish Year in Austria. Good artistic contacts between Vienna and Kraków were of help (some artistic exchanges and curators’ and dealers’ visits to Kraków did no harm), and the response was a success: almost the entire Viennese art world came, Gawlik had an interview on television, and the press was excellent. Some months later, the Gallery Mayer Kainer organised a solo exhibition, *Let’s behave normally*, which launched Maciejowski’s international career.

Adam Budak, another curator from Cracow who is based in Austria, wrote: “Marcin Maciejowski is an anti-Baudelairian painter of the post-media life of bored society mimicking heroes from TV screen, soap operas, tabloid covers, advertisement billboards, cartoon-like characters on the ruins of their own cynicism at the farewell party for the failed project of modernity. Nostalgia, melancholy, boredom, outmoded – these are the ingredients of Maciejowski broken filmic narratives, desperately attempting to explore our environment and times, troubled structures dominated by the past and inhabited human entities driven by desire and fantasies. The show must go on: the great pretenders and femmes fatales – our only and best (psycho-)therapists – are ready to continue the spectacle of behaving normally on the giant screen of our reality”.<sup>6</sup> In the same catalogue, Clarissa Stadler observed that Maciejowski’s new paintings were escapist fantasies.<sup>7</sup> When I was watching, that

5 Carol Duncan, *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in Critical Art History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 180.

6 Adam Budak, “Dominant fiction or the allure of an artist’s (hair)style,” in *Let’s Behave Normally*, ed. Goschka Gawlik and Renate Kainer (Sopot-Wien: PGS-Galerie Meyer Kainer, 2003), 105-12.

7 Clarissa Stadler, “M,” in *Let’s Behave Normally*, ed. Goschka Gawlik and Renate Kainer (Sopot-Wien: PGS-Galerie Meyer Kainer, 2003), 11.

pictures at the Mayer Kainer Gallery, during the kind of private view, I had similar feeling. The question was does the artist escape from Polishness?

Wilhelm Sasnal's paintings addressing Poland's role in the Holocaust are specific. Gregor Jansen wrote: "In fact, specifically in addressing the role of Poland in the Holocaust, the artist's brutal symbolic references, couched in the aesthetics of Pop Art abstraction, effectively parry the critique that comics and thoughtlessly naïve refractions of Art Spiegelman are not appropriate. (...) Sasnal assimilates visual culture and removes it from the confines of mediatized understanding".<sup>8</sup>

Ewa Nowicki, a Polish-American student of mine, showed in her thesis how Grupa Ładnie had broken with stereotypes and opened up the possibility for an open discussion of an international conception of "Polishness". She noted that they did not shirk from making representations of scenes or of propagandist images that were a part of their youth in communist times, and that it was evident that these might be interpreted very differently by audiences in Poland itself and elsewhere. However, they recognised that both sides had to wrestle with the truth that they assumed had to lie behind their different notions of "Polishness".

Grupa Ładnie ceased to exist in 2001, but the artists are still active on Cracow's artistic scene, and they share their time between Cracow and some of the art world's most prestigious artists' residencies. Younger artists, such as Kuba Ziółkowski (b. 1980), who were also hungry for international success, also succeeded in launching their careers with the aid of their art historian colleagues. Ziółkowski's first solo exhibition was in 2000 at the Komisariat (Police station) Gallery, run by the art history students at Kraków Fine Arts Academy. The latter not only showed his work and published a number of essays on it, but instigated a public debate. When the energetic and enterprising Foksal Gallery Foundation invited him to show his work there, they had to convince him that they were the best place for him to go to next – so ignorant was he, at that stage, of the wider artistic scene.

So, what about art history, then? After a decade of globalisation, it does not any longer seem that there is a self-evident need for a "correct", coherent system of classification. As Okwui Enwezor put it: "Biennials and artists in the periphery do not look to the Western framework opportunistically. They want to be valued, respected, and celebrated like everyone else".<sup>9</sup> The comparison between us and all other cultural workers is not meant to cast art historians in an exclusive position. Thomas Crow described the position of art historians as "... fundamentally divided between their fellow researchers and the artists who create the knowledge waiting to be unlocked". So, the young art historians from Cracow did not make such a bad job, after all!

8 Gregor Jansen, "Petite Sensation," *Parkett*, no. 70 (2004): 93.

9 Okwui Enwezor, "Globalism. A Round Table," *Artforum* 42, no. 3 (2003): 157.

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# ON THE DESTROYED<sup>1</sup>

To name just a few: Robert Ruma's planned and unsuccessful exhibition (on the Pope)<sup>2</sup>, the media and party-driven uproar around Maurizio Cattelan's artwork<sup>3</sup>, the scandal over Piotr Uklański's exhibition *Nazis*<sup>4</sup>, the trial of Dorota Nieznalska<sup>5</sup>, the cancellation of Rafał Jakubowicz's exhibition in Poznań a few days before the planned opening<sup>6</sup>, the removal of Katarzyna Kozyra's work from billboards<sup>7</sup>, the removal of Benetton's

1 The text was originally published in Ewa Mikina, "O niszczonych," *Magazyn Sztuki*, no. 29 (2004): 36-40. All following footnotes come from the volume's editors. Translated by Arkadiusz Półtorak

2 The centrepiece of the exhibition, due to take place in 2002, was to become an interactive installation with a dust-covered likeness of John Paul II.

3 *La Nona Ora* (1999) – Maurizio Cattelan's sculpture depicting John Paul II crushed by a meteorite – was exhibited at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw in 2000 in an anniversary exhibition curated by Harald Szeemann, *Beware of Exiting your Dreams: You May Find Yourself in Somebody Else's*. It immediately sparked a scandal. A pair of right-wing politicians decided to remove the rock from the pope's figure, and the controversy eventually led to the resignation of Zachęta's director, Anda Rottenberg.

4 In autumn 2000, Piotr Uklański's *Nazis* – a series of 164 stills from films in which famous actors played Third Reich functionaries – was exhibited at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw. One of the actors featured in the series, Daniel Olbrychski, manifestly destroyed his image in the presence of television cameras.

5 In 2001, at the Wyspa Progress Gallery in Gdańsk, the artist Dorota Nieznalska exhibited an installation entitled *The Passion*, containing, among other elements, a cross with an attached photograph of male genitalia. It sparked a years-long lawsuit, which began after two right-wing MPs filed a notice of offence to religious feelings with the prosecutor's office. More trials under this paragraph were launched in the following years. Nieznalska, who was acquitted after nine years of trial. Since 2015 many other artists were penalized based on article 196 (blasphemy law). As Ewa Mikina suggests later in the text – writing about religious feelings as stemming from "childhood trauma" – similar trials evidenced the growing influence of the Catholic Church on state politics, and served as compensation for censorship and religious repression before 1989.

6 In 2002, Rafał Jakubowicz's exhibition at the Arsenal City Gallery in Poznań was cancelled due to the pressure from the automotive company Volkswagen. The exhibition was to include a video *Arbetisdisziplin* – depicting Volkswagen's contemporary factory near Poznań. The factory's clock tower, the walking security guard and the barbed wire fence evoked obvious associations with concentration camps.

7 Katarzyna Kozyra's work *Blood Ties* was created in 1995 as a commentary on the war in Yugoslavia and depicted two naked women – in fact, Kozyra herself and her sister – against a background of a cross and a crescent. In 1999, on the occasion of the AICA Congress, the images were displayed in urban spaces on billboards, which led to accusations of offending religious feelings and – ultimately – censorship.

advertisement from billboards, the withdrawal of the Polish government from funding Robert Rumas's *Plein Air* project in Vienna<sup>8</sup>, the cancellation of the exhibition *Niech nas zobaczq* (*Let Them See Us*)<sup>9</sup>...

These are merely examples. I have listed them in no chronological order; they have different substantive weight, different political overtones, and different social significance. And the reasons for destroying their public presence are different. Destroying, at any rate, is the right word to denote the practice.

Various forces are at work: popular movements, then parties, then the parliament, state administration, local administration, and finally corporations. Thus, we confront a wide spectrum of agencies, from the spontaneous reaction of the street (in the case of the destruction of Rumas's *Hot Water Bottles*) to the corporate logic of action (in the case of the cancellation of Jakubowicz's exhibition due to pressure from Volkswagen). The reasons for exposing expression to destructive forces are also varied: the taboo of death, nudity, disability, and illness (Kozyra); the taboo of religion (so obvious); the taboo of homoeroticism; the taboo of history (Ukłański); and the taboo of corporate logos (Jakubowicz).

I wonder whether there is any point in maintaining the distinctions I have just made; whether it would not be possible to boil down, on the one hand, the reasons for destroying expression (I accept the premise that the particular work is never as important as the expressive act it is carrying) and, on the other, the mechanism of destruction itself.

Of course, the spectrum is better—any spectrum is better than homogeneity—but our predicament is not getting better, it is getting worse.

It is a matter of sociopsyché, or customs, and in fact, all the reasons mentioned could be reduced to this one. Take a walk down a street in Prague (not to mention Berlin), see how young people are dressed, and then go treat yourself to a stroll along the promenade in Warsaw. In a society as terribly wrapped up in itself as the Polish one, everything must inevitably offend, whether one is unwrapping oneself with clothes, playing with clothes, or maybe hiding behind them. In Poland, there is only clothing. Meanwhile, everything starts with the attire; the attire is both the utterance and the play with the utterance (someone else's and one's own). The attire is first and foremost a difference—mind you, not a distinction—a difference, many differences.

The attired man understands the games of meaning and the mechanisms of making sense. When they meet someone else, they may not notice them, react with revulsion, come into conflict with them, or dominate them, but either way, they are operating in a living social space. Where there is attire, there is always—at least theoretically—a chance to disguise oneself and attune differently. I would rather not say, however, that dressing up is the ultimate goal; I don't think it follows from the above; that would be idiotic.

8 The project *Plein Air* (2002) by Robert Rumas was supposed to be a performance at Karlsplatz in Vienna as part of the programme of the Polish Year in Austria. "For a week, students dressed in white coats wearing black moustaches were to recreate the atmosphere of the square from the time of young Hitler, when he was twice turned down by the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts." See: Jakub Dąbrowski and Anna Demenko, *Censorship in Polish Art After 1989: Art, Law, Politics*, trans. Łukasz Mojsak and Aleksandra Sobczak (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 2019), 425. The book covers manifold cases of censorship in Poland between 1989-2010.

9 The project *Niech nas zobaczq* (*Let Them See Us*) – was a series of photographs depicting Polish LGBT couples. It was commissioned by an NGO Kampania Przeciw Homofobii (The Campaign Against Homophobia) in 2003 and brought to life by the artist Karolina Breguła. The photographs were to be shown at numerous exhibition spaces and billboards. However, the billboard company withdrew from the project – as did some of the institutions that were to host Breguła's exhibition.



The constrained and traumatic sociopsyche. It is not true that religious feelings—or, for that matter, state interests—stem from something like a deep childhood trauma. A society wrapped up in itself does not build social space, and since there is no social space—I don't even mention public space because that's another matter—speech simply cannot exist. With nowhere to exist, it must be destroyed.

And as for the mechanisms, the interventions at stake (at least most of the interventions) are unauthorized and often (always) scandalous; I don't want to write about them or enter more profound analysis, although this is the most sensitive and, after all, common area, the wanted/unwanted area delineated by populist shrieks, media hype, and a crippled administration; the one in which we all have to function, and such analyses are most needed.

If there is anything more useful than analyses, it would be strategies for action, fields of manoeuvre.... That said, one thing bothers me (and that one thing is a lot): the helplessness of those being destroyed, our holy indignation, putting ourselves in the shoes of the victim, the constant signatures, the tears in Dorota Nieznalska's eyes.

For fuck's sake!

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# CZECH ART IN THE TRANSFORMATION PERIOD: THE RELATION- SHIP BETWEEN ART AND POLITICAL COMMITMENT<sup>1</sup>

(SHORTENED)

If we try to define the relationship between “new engagement” and art, we will come across its interpretive, historical and disciplinary ambiguity. Within the art-historical discourse, we can choose from a number of possible positions that lie on a straight line between two extreme points: one of them is the statement that “non-political art” does not exist because simply all art is and must be part of the structures of society; the second is the imperative of “autonomous art”, which embezzles its own essence through any kind of interest or perhaps even servitude. In my opinion, the movement along this hypothetical straight line is symptomatic of the period of transformation and crucial for the image of Czech fine art in the 1990s. If we focus on the development of engaged attitudes in the post-revolutionary period, we can very well observe how the status of art and artists in society changed and see far-reaching changes in artistic practice and the art form itself in a broader context. I consider key collective exhibitions to be an important component of the contemporary context. With the development of the curatorial approach, where the form of the exhibition is determined by its selection and interpretation by its author/curator, the exhibition increasingly becomes a meaning-creating medium and seriously begins to compete with the work of art itself and the personality of the artist within the framework of art history. That is why I follow the development of Czech art in the transformation period, among other things, against the background of major curatorial exhibitions. As part of this review, I think it is clear that the rehabilitation of committed attitudes in art did not take place immediately after the revolution, as we would expect, but only at the end of the 1990s. The first half is marked by the foolish idea that art does not have to be involved in social issues, and so this essay is, paradoxically, rather a description of the absence of involvement in the Czech art scene. Only in its conclusion will I hopefully be able to name the initial impulses of the rehabilitation of engagement and describe the process that brought us to the threshold of the present.

1 The text was originally published in: Pavlína Morganová, “České výtvarné umění v době transformace. Vztahy umění a ‘angažovanosti’,” *Sesit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zony* 9 (2010).

## Postmodern starting points

Two events are key to the development of Czech art during the transformation period. From a political and social point of view, it is of course the Velvet Revolution in 1989. From an artistic point of view, it is the beginning of the postmodern generation still in the times of perestroika totality. Fundamental changes for the entire cultural area, such as civil freedom, the end of censorship and the opening of borders did not initially commence anything new from the perspective of artistic form. They only provided the opportunity to develop, to make it visible, and to formalize what was already here. The postmodern turning point in the Czech art scene took place in the mid-1980s, but we can already register its foreshadowing at the end of the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> At this time, Czech art was waking up from the shock of normalization<sup>3</sup> and began to look for new ways of functioning within the bounded conditions of the totalitarian regime. At the beginning of the 1980s, the activity of the unofficial scene developed and increasingly more unofficial and semi-official exhibitions appeared in private apartments, fringe cultural institutions or freely as part of various symposia. On this platform, outside of official discussions, within alternative communities and within actions whose commonness is hard to believe today, postmodernism also begins to take shape around the middle of the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> This includes key exhibitions of paintings by Vladimír Skrepl and Martin John from 1984 and 1985 and of course the unofficial *Confrontation* between 1984-1987,<sup>5</sup> which were the first wide performances of the emerging generation. These young artists were intoxicated by the energy of the *New wild ones* (*Neue Wilde*), the primitivism of German neo-expressionism; they were interested in breaking the visual and thematic integrity of the image. They were not afraid to fragment and then connect the previously unconnectable. If we look at photos from individual exhibitions today, we are not so much shocked by the appearance of individual works, but rather by their installation. They are hung wherever possible, in the backyard, on the staircase, on the facade of the house—there was so much work and so little space. However, the photos also capture an extraordinary atmosphere of freedom, the joy of mutual confrontation, the feeling that something new is coming. It was a generation that was keenly interested in events in the West and did not share the distance of previous generations. They leafed through magazines such as *Flash Art*, *Kunstforum*, *Art in America* or *Artforum* and liked to be taught by theoreticians who followed the events in the West. In addition to other personalities, the Ševčík couple played a key role here, as they were intensely interested in postmodern ideas and published a number of articles about them.

The two main counterpoints of the time were the groups *Tvrdohlaví* (*Stubborns*)<sup>6</sup> and *12/15*<sup>7</sup> and their confrontation, *The Prague Cultural Summer Exhibition* (Prague

2 It is primarily a samizdat translation of the texts of Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* [Složitost a protiklad v architektuře] (Praha, 1979) and Charles Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (Praha, 1979).

3 By “normalization shock” I mean the violent restructuring of cultural institutions after 1968, the reorganization of the Union of Czechoslovak Visual Artists, the cancellation of important art periodicals and, finally, the re-impossibility of officially presenting one's work to a large part of the art community.

4 I use the term “postmodern” here as an equivalent of postmodernism or postmodern art.

5 *Confrontation I* (Prague – Smíchov: Grafická 31, studio of Jiří David, 24 May 1984) took place in the premises of a small studio and the courtyard of an apartment building. Most of the exhibited works were paintings and drawings, there were also several sculptures and two installations.

6 The Tvrdohlaví group was founded on June 3, 1987. The founding act was signed by: Jiří David, Stanislav Diviš, Michael Gabriel, Zdeněk Lhotský, Stanislav Milkov, Petr Nikl, Jaroslav Róna, František Skála, Čestmír Suška, and Václav Marhoul.

7 The group 12/15 announced to SČVU its establishment immediately after the Tvrdohlaví. The act was signed by: Jiří Beránek, Václav Bláha, Jaroslav Dvořák, Kurt Gebauer, Ivan Kafka, Vladimír Novák, Ivan Ouhel, Petr Pavlík, Michael Rittstein, Tomáš Švéda (member

– Vysočany: People's House, 1 – 10 July 1987), around which a wide discussion broke out<sup>8</sup> and which best documents the turning point in the attitude towards the reality of art. Generation 12/15 represented art following the aesthetics of the 60s, kept fully in a modern format (paintings and sculptures and sculptural installations predominantly). The emphasis on individual style is also classic. This relationship with previous generations is well illustrated by the position of 12/15, leaning on classical modernity shaped by totalitarian experience. Unlike 12/15, *the Stubborns* entered the scene with only a relatively small normalization load. They detached themselves from the political and social reality that bound the previous generation. They began to relate only to the space of postmodern aesthetics.

Although the postmodern visual language on the Czech scene of the early 1990s developed on a broad front (besides *Tvrdohlavi*, it was used by a number of other personalities, such as Milan Knížák, Jiří Kovanda, Daniel Balabán, Tomáš Císařovský, Martin Mainer, Jan Pištěk, or Vladimír Skrepl), it continued to be seen especially by the more conservative part of the scene as a superficial fad. The first wave of Czech postmodernism is criticised for its eclecticism, i.e. adopting ready-made practices from abroad, because of the artistic opinion itself that transcends modernist taboos, but also because of its apolitical nature. However, the abandonment of the dialectic of official and unofficial, which this generation experienced, was no longer considered to be the basis of its existence within the art scene. As a result, it was often subconsciously perceived by the previous generations, which constituted a large part of the art scene, as amoral. In the early 1990s, postmodern artists formed the most current core of the Czech art scene, exhibited very intensively and slowly gained recognition, which is evidenced by the fact that several of them won the prestigious *Jindřich Chalupecký Prize*.<sup>9</sup> If we look at the works of the generation of the 80s from today's point of view, i.e. primarily the works of painting, we will find very few expressions responding to the lived present. Most of the artists of this generation deal with formal pictorial regularities. If they touch on political and social issues, it is always completely in a non-participating aestheticizing way. An example can be the cycle of paintings by Jiří David, from 1988, with political symbols, such as *Home*, *Bohemia* or *On the Roses*. Vladimír Merta's cycles entitled *The Big Financial Scandal* or *Advertisement for Infinity* (1992) are unique commentaries on contemporary events.

### The first post-revolutionary generation

In the first half of the 1990s, the first post-revolutionary generation of artists entered the Czech scene. She very quickly oriented herself in the Western context and began to compare domestic postmodern expressions, even though she built on them, with the situation of world art. In 1990, a new generation represented by the *Pondelí* (*Monday*) group applied for the floor.<sup>10</sup> Its first exhibition was organized together with the Russian group *Medhermeneutika* in the Young Artists' Gallery by Milena Slavická. Another exhibition, prepared by Milena Slavická and at which *Pondelí* members

of Jiří Načeradský group since 1988, Jiří Sopko since 1990). This is a group of artists of the 1970s generation.

8 Texts from this discussion, which appeared in several samizdat periodicals, are summarized in *Selections of Interest from Home and Abroad*, (Praha, 1988).

9 The Jindřich Chalupecký Prize was established in 1990 at the initiative of Václav Havel, Theodor Pištěk and Jiří Kolář. It was granted to Vladimír Kokolia in 1990, followed by František Skála (1991), Michal Nesázal (1992), Martin Mainer (1993), Michal Gabriel (1994), and Petr Nikl (1995).

10 The Monday artistic group was founded in 1989. Its members were Milena Dopitová, Pavel Humhal, Petr Lysáček, Michal Nesázal, Petr Písařík, and Petr Zubek. They performed for the first time in 1990 at an exhibition in the Young Artists' Gallery in Prague.

exhibited, was the *New Intimacy* exhibition, which was held at the beginning of 1991 under the banner of Galerie Pi-Pi-Art at ÚLUV. The curatorial concept once again concentrates on a new type of art, which seems to renounce “artism” and calmly pass off the most ordinary objects and photographs as works of art.

For this “transitional” generation, it is already normal to use various media (including new ones) and create combined objects and installations. Compared to the previous generation, these are unacceptably ordinary objects, where often the only creative act is their transfer to an artistic context (e.g. the photographs of *Chewing gum* [1993] by Milena Dopitová or *Stars of my Body* [1993] by Pavel Humhal – photographs in which the author circled the freckles on his body). Of course, these moments are not entirely new in Czech art, it is enough to mention the work of Jiří Kovanda, which has continuously developed since the 1970s. On the formal side, this generation is typical of experimentation with the form of a work of art, in which various materials are used. These are processed manually or designed, or combined with photographs, manufactured objects, or even with objects from normal life. Without the “postmodern lesson”, this approach would not have been possible. The breaking of the image as a whole, the democratization of the creative process as well as its release and liberation from traditional schemes, all opened up new possibilities, which young people naturally took up.

At the beginning of the 1990s, several important exhibitions were held at the Václav Špála Gallery in Prague. It was, for example, the exhibition *New Names* (1991), which presented some important personalities of the coming generation, such as Jiří Černický or Filip Turek, or the exhibition Václav Stratil's *Rhetorical Patient* (1991). Another example is the exhibition *Between Aesop and Mowgli* (1992), which was prepared as an accompanying event of the AICA congress in Vienna. The exhibition was interesting primarily as a representative show of the young generation, which was supposed to form a counterpoint to the *Situation '92* exhibition in Mánes, presenting older artists. As the last curatorial exhibition from the Václav Špála Gallery from the early 1990s, I would mention Pavel Humhal's curatorial project *Her Brother, His Husband* (1992). This artist from the Pondelí group tried to prepare an exhibition on the theme of the relationship between the intimate and the public. At the same time, like most members of Pondelí at that time, he was thinking about new artistic practices and their possibility of communication with the viewer.

### **Social background and changes in cultural traffic**

Fine art was born in the 1990s against the background of hectic, and to some extent chaotic, changes in the whole of society. Not only the political and economic system was transformed, but also individual cultural institutions and the media space. In addition to the mental transformation of society in connection with the acquired freedom of travel, the democratization of the media space and free access to information, the gradual acclimation to multiculturalism, gender, ecological and globalization issues were significant. And after the revolution, the greatest influence on art was the adaptation to capitalist mechanisms (in 1991, free price formation was established as well as the commencement of small and large privatization). The commercial side of art was traumatic for most of the art community. Before the revolution, it was officially possible to trade in art only through the Czech Fine Arts Fund, which at the time of normalization meant an unequivocal endorsement of the regime and the idea of socialist realism. Therefore, the gray zone logically lived in the feeling that “true”, ideology-free art is only made for the closest circle of friends, and making it for the general public and for money is essentially a betrayal of one's own truth (morality).



This myth is quite understandable in the situation of normalizing Czechoslovakia, but it was already paralyzing in the 1990s, and it is still possible to find it in some texts and subconscious attitudes. The post-revolutionary transformation of Czech fine art could perhaps be narrowed down to overcoming this attitude. It took some time to get used to the idea that even “real” art is a state-supported component of culture, paid for by public funds and with all the restrictions that result from it.

Even worse, everyone got used to the fact that art is also a commodity. Awareness of this fact was complicated throughout the 1990s by the de facto non-existence of the Czech art market and its structures (private commercial galleries and auction houses began to develop more steadily only in the second half of the 1990s). The number of enlightened individuals who supported culture from their means earned elsewhere was small. Awareness of the prestige associated with cultural sponsorship and patronage had yet to be awakened in Czech society. It was the drawing of art through market mechanisms back into the reality of public space that played an important role in the discussion about the position of art in society. The artistic community had to realize its dependence on the market system, political and social structures. In short, that it is part of the public community. Deep-rooted scepticism towards artistic involvement, stemming from bad pre-revolutionary experiences, became a relic during the building of a free democratic state. As such, when do more coherent, committed attitudes begin to appear on the Czech scene? And when do visual artists begin to engage in societally burning issues again? How did the re-politicization of Czech fine art proceed?

### What is feminism?

If we take a general look at the exhibitions of the 1990s, it is clear that the Czech art scene at that time rather dealt with a new approach to artistic creation, new ways of operating artistic operations, principles of curatorial exhibitions and purely theoretical topics. One of them was the feminist discourse, which became one of the novelties. Although the topic has been engaged by its activist nature, in the Czech environment it has a completely non-confrontational, rather lyrical nature. First of all, we have to mention the *Columbus Egg* exhibition, which was curated by Vlasta Čiháková Noshiro in 1991.<sup>11</sup> Her catalogue introduction is based on the text by Jiřina Šmejkalová “What is feminism: what to do about her/him?”<sup>12</sup>, which was one of the first post-revolutionary summary texts in our country, informing about the feminist movement. The fact that Čiháková Noshiro does not hesitate to retell its entire history proves the level of awareness of this completely normal topic. Despite these, at first glance, feminist proclamations, the exhibition itself, whose theme was eggs, and for which Čiháková Noshiro selected four prominent artists of the time, sounded like a non-confrontationally lyrical “women’s” exhibition.

Another exhibition from 1992 – *Women’s Homes*, which was prepared by women artists in the Women’s Homes in Smíchov, represented a similar way of thinking.<sup>13</sup> The exhibition was continued a year later in the Štencův dům, where the nucleus formed by perhaps the most prominent young female artists of the Czech scene was supplemented by several foreign artists. This was a unique performance, demonstrating the emergence of a gendered attitude to artistic creation, without programmatically

11 Prague: Galerie Behémot, 7 April – 26 April 1992. Artists: Veronika Bromová, Zorka Ságlová, Margita Titlová-Ylovsky, and Kateřina Vincourová.

12 Jiřina Šmejkalová, “Co je feminismus: kam s ní/m?,” *Tvar* 2 (1991): 37–41.

13 *Women’s Homes II*, Prague: Štencův dům, March 1994. Artists: Veronika Bromová, Andréee Cooke, Irena Jůzová, Els Opsomer, Dora Krol, Kristina Lorentzon, Markéta Othová, Elen Řádová, Štěpánka Šimlová, Kateřina Vincourová, and Beatrix Weis.

advocating feminism. However, the approaches to it were very contradictory, in addition to the conscious feminist attitude of some authors (among theorists such as Martina Pachmanová and Mirek Vodrážka), a “distrustful” approach, more typical of post-feminism, prevailed in the Czech debate on these issues. Perhaps it would even be more appropriate to call it “non-feminism”. This is what the survey prepared by Věra Jirousová for the journal *Výtvarné umění* [Fine Art] in 1993 under the title “There is no such thing as women’s art” was outlining.<sup>14</sup> The author asked seven questions regarding women’s art and their attitudes towards it to ten outstanding representatives of Czech art from the older and the youngest generation (e.g. Milena Dopitová, Irena Jůzová, Alena Kučerová, Zorka Ságlová, Věra Janoušková, Olga Karlíková, Adriena Šimotová). Their answers had a typically Czech “non-feminist” character because they were based on the dualism of men and women and hinted at their inequality, but with the second breath, they emphasized that there was no need to change anything. The word “feminism” does not appear in either the questions or the answers. Milena Dopitová tries to define feminism with only one answer. However, this does not mean that this topic has not affected the Czech scene: gender issues have been dealt with in a number of exhibitions, works of art, texts, and books.<sup>15</sup>

Among the most important players on the Czech art scene at that time was the Soros Center, founded in New York in 1992 and provided direct support to the visual arts in individual post-communist countries. However, its role was not limited to financial support through grants and residencies. One of the main activities of the center was the organization of annual exhibitions. Since these exhibitions were one of the few generously funded shows of contemporary art at the time, they were extremely attractive to artists, not only because of the prestige of exhibiting in them, but also because of the Western “normality” of the practical conditions for the exhibitors (the Soros Center ensured installation service, pickups and contributed to the implementation of projects). The exhibitions took the form of a kind of salon, where the submitted works were selected by a commission, and therefore the resulting form was not a curated exhibition, but a representative show on specific topics. The first Soros exhibition in 1993 probably had a deliberately non-controversial general theme of landscape, but the next two annual exhibitions, which took place in the second half of the 1990s, played a much more important role.<sup>16</sup> The overview of the exhibitions of the first half was closed by the exhibition *Trial operation* of the Ševčík family, in which he collaborated with Vladimír Skrepl.<sup>17</sup> This exhibition was held in the spring of 1995 in the Mánes exhibition hall. For its time, it was unique not only in its scope and financial support (perhaps only the annual exhibitions of the Soros Center had a similar scope within the current scene), but also in its curatorial concept, which was directly related to the functioning of the scene and was an attempt to expand it by the personalities of the younger generation.

14 Věra Jirousová, “Žádné ženské umění neexistuje,” *Výtvarné umění* 17, no. 1 (1993): 42-52.

15 See for example: Martina Pachmanová, “Dějiny umění, feminismu a moderní historiografie,” *Revue Labyrint*, no. 1-2 (1997); —, “Rozum, cit, ženy a současné umění,” *Atelier* 11, no. 12 (1998); —, “Politizace soukromí nebo privatizace politiky? Roda umění v době transformace,” *Aspekt*, no. 1 (1999); Josef Chuchma Marie Chřibková, Eva Klimentová ed., *Feminismus devadesátých let českýma očima* (Praha: One. Woman Press, 1999); Zuzana Štefková, “Obraz ženy přelomu tisíciletí ženskýma očima / The Image of Woman at the Turn of the Century through the Eyes of Women,” *Umění* 5, no. 3 (2003).

16 *Krajina, Prague*: Gallery of the Capital City of Prague, House U kamenného zvonu, 22 June – 29 August 1993.

17 *Trial run. Is My Art Young?*, curators Jana Ševčíková, Jiří Ševčík, Vladimír Skrepl, Prague: Mánes Exhibition Hall, 25 April – 17 May 1995. The curatorial project sparked a sharp discussion about the interpretation of young Czech art.



Another important phenomenon of the 1990s was the creation of projects that took place in alternative spaces, often outside of Prague. Even here, we do not find more committed attitudes, if we leave aside the effort to break free from power structures by using places outside the traditional artistic space. Undoubtedly, exhibitions such as the *Totalitarian Zone* under the Stalin Monument on Letné Park were the beginning of this approach, breaking down the rigid context of the gallery's white cube, which was desecrated not only by communist cultural censorship, but also by Western post-modern institutional criticism.<sup>18</sup> They were followed by a number of projects outside of Prague. Probably the most significant was the Hermit project, founded in 1992 in the premises of the former Plasy monastery. Symposiums, festivals, workshops, and residency programs organized by a circle around the art historian Miloš Vojtěchovský were regularly held here until 1999, who tried to build a permanent centre for meta-media, i.e. a platform for contemporary fine art with all possible overlaps with new media, experimental music, theatre, and performance. This way of presenting art, which connected exhibitions, site-specific installations, concerts, lectures, performances and many other projects, was also used by a number of other projects in the 1990s. In the second half of the decade, there were attempts to transfer this alternative way of exhibiting to a conservative gallery environment. Above all, we can mention the two-part exhibition *Jitro kouzelníků? / Dawn of wizards?*, prepared by Jaroslav Anděl and Miloš Vojtěchovský for the Veletržní palác in 1996 and 1997. Although these projects were sometimes perceived by the conservative part of the scene as more of a marginal diversion, they had an unprecedented influence on the formation of attitudes, especially of the young generation. Moreover, they succeeded in showing that art presented in such an expanded context has a massive group of viewers and is often more attractive to the cultural public than classical exhibitions.

The third annual exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art, *Artwork in Public Spaces*, which took place in 1997, certainly contributed to the return of involvement in Czech art.<sup>19</sup> Like the previous ones, it was prepared based on a selection of submitted projects. The theme was further developed by the Ševčík couple's exhibition *Reduced budget* at the turn of 1997 and 1998 in Mánes.<sup>20</sup> Rather than public space, she dealt with the social situation in the broader context of cultural practice. The very title of the exhibition humorously glossed over the political and economic changes in Czech society, which significantly deepened the "stupid mood." The re-tightening of tight belts hit the art scene, for example, in the form of a reduction in grants from the Ministry of Culture. The Ševčíks were well aware of the absence of engaged art in the post-revolutionary era and tried to return it to its critical role. With the exhibition, they tried to report primarily on the non-aesthetic context of art, yet, in addition to politically engaged works, they also exhibited works with a personal, rather hermetic statement, effectively illustrating the shape of the contemporary Czech scene.

### Politically engaged art

As can be seen from the previous overview, at the end of the 1990s the Czech art scene finally came to a discussion about the fundamental issues of the functioning of art

18 About two hundred artists from a dozen countries took part in exhibitions at the turn of 1989 and 1990 in the cavity under the former Stalin monument. In its time, it was the largest gallery, concert and theater scene of independent culture.

19 *Artwork in public spaces*, curators Ludvík Hlaváček, Karolína Fabelová, Kateřina Pavlíčková, Pavla Niklová, Prague: National Gallery, Veletržní palác, September - October 1997. The exhibition also took place in Benešov, Opava, Klenová, Hříškov, Ústí nad Labem, Otrokovice, and in the forest near Bublava

20 *Reduced budget*, curators Jana Ševčíková, Jiří Ševčík, Prague: Mánes - upper exhibition space, 30 December 1997 - 8 February 1998.

in relation to society. Up to that time, the political attitudes of Czech artists, which were rather latently present, were perhaps most urgently revealed by the Pode Bal and Rafani groups, which are still active participants in the Czech art scene.<sup>21</sup>

The Pode Bal group gained attention in 1998 when they created a series of posters in protest against the amendment of the “drug law.” Since the posters were hanging in the premises of the Chamber of Deputies during the third reading, the representatives of the political parties were forced to comment on them. This project, entitled *Prohibition of Parliament*, was essentially the first clearly formulated political work of art since David Černý’s *Pink Tank* (1991), whose repainting as a tank of the liberators of Prague after World War II reached the widest public. Perhaps even more popular was the project *GEN – Gallery of Established Nomenclature* (2000). Pode Bal created 36 portraits of former collaborators of the STB, KGB, StB officers and communist cadres who occupied important positions in Czech society even after the revolution. The portraits included biographies of each person, informing about their pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary activities. The project was exhibited by Jaroslav Krbůšek, then curator of the Václav Špála Gallery. The exhibition titled *Malik urvi* had a far-reaching impact. Leaving aside the fact that one of the portraits “procured” the end of the sponsorship of the gallery from Budvar to České Budějovice, perhaps the most important thing besides the media attention and the interest of the general public was the discussion that broke out in the very bosom of art. Art has stepped out of its “safe” space, where it plays by its own rules, into the world of politics. It hit society in the here and now. Of course, one of the initial reactions was to doubt whether it was art at all. However, the subsequent work of Pode Bal, as well as the rehabilitation of political themes in Czech art, sufficiently refuted these doubts. Pode Bal showed the Czech art scene that art does not have to be just the production of other artefacts, but can also be a critical social practice.

Next to Pode Bal, Rafani is probably the most important radical group focused on the relationship between art and society. They focused on current and residual topics that are displaced or distorted in society due to their problematic nature. One of Rafan’s first events was the *Questionnaire event* (2002), exploring the Czech past in connection with the problematic deportation of Germans after World War II. Dressed in black uniforms, at a makeshift table, passers-by filled out questionnaires about the removal. The questionnaires had two versions, one worded to induce pro-removal responses and the other to induce anti-removal responses, thus pre-manipulating the outcome. Two of the members of the group had signs hung around their necks with the image of the disgraced Germans gathered in May 1945 on Strossmayer Square in Prague, where the action was taking place. The group then sent the statistically processed results of more than five hundred questionnaires to the media.

The realization that the artistic community is part of a broader political and social practice is, in my opinion, a fundamental moment of the entire transformation of contemporary fine art. It took place on many levels that interacted and resonated with each other. I consider the three fundamental pillars of this transformation to be: the transformation of the art form itself, the transformation of the artistic operation and changes in the position of art and the artist in society. Although it might seem that the starting point of the post-revolutionary transformation should logically be a discussion of the relationship between art and society, in the Czech environment it only became the completion of this process.

21 The Pode Bal group was founded in 1998 by the graduates of the VŠUP in Prague: Hana Valihorová, Petr Motyčka, Antonín Kopp, Michal Šiml, and Martin Krpec. The Rafani group was established in 2000. The founding exhibition of the group took place in November 2000 at the AVU Gallery in Prague with participants Radim Kořínek, Marek Meduna, Petr Motejzík and Luděk Rathouský.

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**GENDER AND BODY**

# BODY LANGUAGE, OR A DIFFERENT READING. ON THE BIRTH OF BODY AND GENDER IN SLOVAK VISUAL ART<sup>1</sup>

(SHORTENED)

The Dictionary of Slovak Synonyms (*Synonymický slovník slovenčiny*, published in 2000 by Veda, the Slovak Academy of Sciences publishing house) gives two equivalents for the word muž, “man”, which may be rendered: 1. *fellow*, 2. *husband*.

For the word žena, “woman”, its equivalents may be rendered:

*girl, wife, dame, lady, creature, rebecca* (i.e. manipulator), *witch, fury, xanthippe* (i.e. shrew), *megeera* (i.e. scold), *babe, young one, doxie, old one, slavey, matron, mauther, vamp, other half, slut, candy box*.

## The Body and Corporeality

The subject of this article is not the problem of “figuration”, as the situational portrayal of the human being in their everyday life, nor is it an overview of the modes of symbolic representation of humanity (in art usually expressed principally through pain, suffering, sacrifice). Instead, the article focuses on that part of art where the spiritual side is “suppressed” in favour of the corporal aspect, or where the body represents some other significances bound up with its model as a social construction.

The author’s method of work employs analysis of the category of corporeality, connected with the gender differentiation current in contemporary art theory.<sup>2</sup> Based on analysis of the main features and context of depiction of the naked body in the work of three prominent representatives of Slovak visual art (Stano Filko, Alex

1 This article was originally published in Zora Rusinová, “Reč tela alebo Iné čítanie: K zrodu problému tela a pohlavia v slovenskom výtvarnom umení” in *Galéria 2003: Ročenka Slovenskej národnej galérie v Bratislave*, ed. Beata Jablonská and Alexandra Kusá (Bratislava: SNG, 2004), 9-32. The author examines the work of two male artists and one female artist, used as model examples, with particular attention to the gender-sexual portrayal of women in their work. Although these are artists of the same generation and of kindred artistic orientations, nevertheless the author points to differences where a man and a woman create artworks, and she attempts to define this through aspects of feminism. We publish an abridged version here.

2 The closest term corresponding with “gender” in the Slovak language is a “rod”. In the original text of this article, I have used the latter term similarly to Martina Pachmanová. See Martina Pachmanová, ed., *Neviditeľná žena. Antologie súčasného amerického myšlení o feminizmu, dejinách a vizualitě* (Praha: One Woman Press, 2002), 407.

Mlynářčik and Jana Želibská) in the 1960s and subsequent decades of totalitarian rule, a comparison is made from the different angles and approaches towards the male and female artists. Among other things, in the polarity of the two standpoints the article attempts to define aspects of the then-awakening feminism, which was gradually establishing itself even in the circumstances of our culture, afflicted as it was by the doctrine of socialist realism.

The aim of the work, then, is to reflect on the models of sex and heterosexuality that were naturalised and normative in artistic expression, and to interpret the role played by the conventions of visual representation in establishing and maintaining the secondary status of women in socialist society (although such conventions were dominant in other societies too); also, to trace the creation and reinforcement of concepts of gender differences and subjectivity introduced by men, not only as creators, but also as viewers. A number of articles addressing problems of visibility and observation present a starting point.<sup>3</sup> Our premise, however, is a central critical principle of feminist postmodernist theory: the concept of the “male gaze.” Its core comes from the idea that in art and culture the masculine has been the privileged subject and exclusive proprietor of subjectivity, while the approach taken to subjectivity has produced the feminine as a primary object.<sup>4</sup>

Feminist authors, whether they are adherents of biological essentialism or the theory of gender, for the most part, concentrate their attention on a revised examination of the sensory process of vision and its apparatuses, especially in relation to the body.<sup>5</sup> They draw attention to the problem of objectification of the female body, not perceived as a natural being, but serving rather as a vessel for certain ideas and thoughts.<sup>6</sup> They find the same principles in its portrayal in art in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, and they see its frequent association with landscape and territory as partly anchored in the concept of women as property in marriage, as well as in the old understanding of her bonds with Nature.

Needless to say, gender differences have been expressed in art from time immemorial, and fundamentally they have opposing forms. While the man has always symbolised steadfastness, struggle, revolt, strength in suffering, on the other hand woman has represented fertility, love, physical delight, motherhood, humility etc.

3 E.g. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London-New York: Penguin, 1977); Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven-London: Yale University, 1983); Nicolas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader* (London-New York: Routledge, 2001).

4 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); —, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). She creatively used the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan to explain modes of representation and audience viewing in the field of film, and to define the mechanisms via which film offers the male viewer not only pleasure but also power. See Pachmanová, 321, 43.

5 Particularly interesting, as regards criticism of the term “objectivity”, is Donna Haraway’s article “The Persistence of Vision”, where she turns attention to the human body: “Feminist objectivity is about limited placing and situated knowledge” and emphasizes that “optics is a politics of positioning” and “Seeing is always both about power and position and history is a testimony of male domination (...) The eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power”. After: Mirzoeff, 191-95. See also Pachmanová, 408.

6 See Linda Nochlin, “Why Are There No Great Women Artists?,” in *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, ed. Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran (New York: Basic Books, 1971), and further Janet Wolff, “The Invisible Flâneuse. Women and the Literature of Modernism,” in *Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Coventry: Warwick University, 1989). According to Linda Nochlin, it is “the politics of vision that prescribes how art history looks and what it means. Visibility and portrayal are always connected with economic, political and social structures.” See also: Martina Pachmanová, *Věrnost v pohybu. Hovory o feminismu, dějinách a vizualitě* (Praha: One Woman Press, 2001), 29.



In Anthea Callen's view, the cultural process of differentiation served a hierarchical social order where the position of man and woman was defined. She believes that there is no such thing as the "natural" body, but only the abstract represented body. It is always socially constructed, whether we are speaking of historical anatomical studies or a Raphael nude; always there is representation which comprises a complex network of cultural ideas, especially concepts of racial, class and gender differentiations, and its significances are afterwards further modified in the act of consumption. Via conceptualisation and description of corporeality, what Callen finds in visual images are, above all, potential mediators of the living experience of the body, our own and that of others. Basing ourselves on these, we identify ourselves, or we find a different "other", which likewise reinforces our image of our own corporeal existence.<sup>7</sup>

Besides Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, another who has had a major influence on feminist art theory, *vis-à-vis* understanding the subject as awareness of one's identity and, in that context, of sexuality also, is Michel Foucault. He turned attention to the question, "in what manner the human being turns to itself as a subject", specifically "how people recognise the subjects of sexuality in themselves".<sup>8</sup> In the chapter on "Subject and Power" in *Thinking about the External*, he sees sexuality as a third instance of the modes of objectivization (alongside, firstly, examination that strives to achieve the status of science, and secondly, the practices of division and distinction) which transform human beings into subjects.<sup>9</sup>

Afterwards, writing on these lines in their anthology *The Expanding Discourse*, Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard observe that: "The subject is not neutral material, but a nest of live distortions here, a basket of telling omissions there." At the same time, they say: "Feminist scholars share a commitment to change history, by creating a fuller and more accurate account of the part played both by real women and by thematised and constructed Woman in its making."<sup>10</sup>

### The Body as Seen by "Him" and "Her"

In the final third of the 1960s, three artists above all had a creative language that came close to the pop-art culture of the time, with its Esperanto of crisscrossing influences. They were Alex Mlynárčik, Stano Filko and Jana Želibská, all of whom portrayed the female body in a confection of meanings and a fantastical fiction produced by a cross-breeding of media.<sup>11</sup>

At this point, one must remember that in art history, the female nude is not merely one of the favourite motifs of portrayal. It has also functioned as a symbolic sign: woman has been accorded the role of an aesthetically and artistically attractive object of observation, where sexuality was an unconcealed "added value", although (in my opinion) such a portrayal of feminine quality did not rule out an aspect of adoration and the evocation of a certain mystery. By contrast, in the iconoclastic atmosphere of the late 1960s, female portrayal was shifted right to the borderlines of traditional figuration, to a register of formal and semantic simplification; it became rather a conceptual variant

7 Anthea Callen, "Ideal Masculinities: An Anatomy of Power," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicolas Mirzoeff (London-New York: Routledge, 2001).

8 Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982).

9 —, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside," in *Foucault / Blanchot* (New York: Zone Books, 1987).

10 Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Expanding Discourse. Feminism and Art History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), X.

11 In the late 1960s there were also some works by Olga Bartošiková and Mira Haberernová which inclined towards this expressive register. See Zora Rusinová, ed., *V mene syntézy umenia a života. Šesťdesiate roky v slovenskom výtvarnom umení* (Bratislava: SNG, 1995), 180, 84.

of reality. Apart from that, in the frequently impersonal and semi-industrial techniques of pop-art, the female nude lost the enigmatic quality afforded by the painterly styles of great artists of the past (e.g. Giorgione, Titian).

By the end of that decade, there were accordingly three artists, simultaneously creating, whose works were distinguished by a common inclination towards inter-media overlaps and also by an emphasis on the gender-sexual status of the woman, even though all three were only apparently standing on a common ground.

Their provocative “figuration”, typical of the western culture of that time, lends support to Griselda Pollock’s opinion that “femininity is not a natural condition of the female person”, but is rather “a historically variable ideological construction of meanings for the sign W O M A N, which is created by another social group which derives its identity and imagined superiority by manufacturing the spectre of this fantastic Other. W\*O\*M\*A\*N is both an idol and nothing but a word.”<sup>12</sup>

It is not the purpose of my article to defend one of the two sides of the duality of the human being and to call pop-art a spiritually vacuous art, simply because it portrayed the superficial side of phenomena and hence also of the body. Nor do I aim to make a qualitative evaluation of the work of this or that analysed artist. When analysing the creation of the nude, I concentrate principally (even though not exclusively) on the different starting positions of the creative subject in the spirit of Foucault’s definition, as formulated in *L’Archeologie du savoir*: “the subject is a place or position which varies greatly according to its type and the threshold of the statement, and the ‘author’ himself is merely one of these possible positions in certain cases.”<sup>13</sup> In agreement with the premise of the feminist theory which has accepted these definitions of Foucault’s, I especially follow the gender positions of the artists and the differing approach to reality resulting from those. I try to see “gender relations” as “a complex set of social processes. Gender, both, as an analytic category and a social process, is relational. That is, gender relations are complex and unstable processes (or temporary totalities in the language of dialectics) constituted by and through interrelated parts.”<sup>14</sup>

Within these coordinates, I attempt to show that it is precisely because of the differing position of the subject that we find in Filko’s, Mlynárčik’s and Želibská’s works from the second half of the 1960s, besides affinities alluding to the viscosity of advertising and the highlighting of primary sexual symbols, also certain differences that are not derived only from the individuality of the styles. For all three, the female body is an index that directly signifies delight, and it is hence a diagram of one of its functions, erotic satisfaction. However, each one of them “empowers” the body differently, and for each of them it is linked with a different personal experience, a differing genealogy of language.

Already in his first graphic cycles, *Slovak Scheherazade* (1965), *Map of the World* and *Map of Czechoslovakia with Female Figures* (1966), Stano Filko reduced the female nude in provocative poses to a flat coloured sign with highlighting of the breasts and the loose silhouette. Here its figure, generalised in the manner of commercial emblems, expansively covers a cartographic network of states and continents, linearly differentiated, as a pronounced coloured stain. In this seemingly anonymous

12 Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicolas Mirzoeff (London-New York: Routledge, 2001), 77-78.

13 Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988), 55.

14 Jane Flax, “Postmodern and Gender Relations,” in *Feminism / Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York-London: Routledge, 1990), 44.

reflection on the female body, it is as if Filko's eroticism became the unifying code valid for the entire earth, the world's dominant principle.

Contrastingly, in the early lithographs by Jana Želibská (which emerged in parallel) it is the male body that represents the human being as a biological kind *sui generis*. Želibská's works are fashioned with matter-of-fact detachment, inspired by illustrations in anatomical atlases with exposed musculature (the cycle *Tables*, 1966). Here the body recalls rather an adapted graphic schema, similar to the morphology of her pop-art-style, decorative-seeming series *Beetles* (1966) or *Flowers* (1968), based on rhythmical variation in the arrangement of surface symbols. Želibská turned to an ironical representation of gender (emphasised in the title *Her*) only in the graphic cycle *Elle*, where variants on the female body are sexually highlighted using flowers (the shapes here served as a basis for particular parts of the luminous cube in the environment *Kandariya Mahadeva* (1969)).

Alex Mlynárčik in his early serigraphs came close to Filko, with his emphasis on the erotic quality of the female nude. Nonetheless, given his starting point in photography, he retained more links with the language of advertising "hyperreality." The woman in underwear, as an impressively packaged article of consumption, changed to a multiply reproduced media symbol deprived of any aura (*Anita*, 1962; *Folies No. 17*, 1967).

For all three of these artists, graphic art was no more than a starting point. By the last three years of the 1960s, they had already incorporated the female nude in the form of three-dimensional works, while at the same time also affirming the exclusively erotic aspect of representation of the body.

### **Woman as Principle of Materiality and Opposite of the Spiritual**

Already in his pendent *Altars* (1965–1966), objects which were not only in name but in shape also were alternative religious forms. Filko used (alongside diverse small objects, crosses and mirrors for example, which animated the surface structure) cut-outs of provocative women's bodies from popular magazines. This was the body conceived as "a treat for the voyeur", in the spirit of the makeshift decoration of rooms inhabited by men who are obliged to live for a certain time in celibacy (as in workers' hostels, barracks). Besides this, however, a magnified female figure afterwards appeared on his textile curtains, synthetic floors, and blinds. Filko also used this figure as a surface pattern on deckchairs, inflatable mattresses, balls and cushions, which he sometimes incorporated in environments (e.g. *Room of Love*, *Erotic Environment*, 1965–1966). The figure of woman, as a symbol impressed on the most varied materials, thus became a superficial embellishment with an eccentric sensual effect. Her body in this instance did not represent an object of reverence or adoration, but rather a permanent object of erotic (consumer's) desire, a kind of refurbished requisite representing one entire brand of the history of culture. Female shapes reduced to a characteristic emblematic form, similar to other "topical" objects of that time (bombs, traffic signs): Filko made them components of his ideas of a new technological age, on the lines of McLuhan's concept of "the extension of man." But in this connection, it is as if he saw the female body, alongside what was developing and progressing, as representing something constant, changeless and permanent, an atavistic force through which we are attached to our roots, our beginnings and our materiality. As a figural symbol, this body referred to concrete, intimately familiar reality, while the constructively erected minimalist forms that made up the contours of Filko's environments, by their impersonality and luminous effects, were a symbol of the universe (something new and unknown, a futuristic vision that has not yet become clear). The female nude, as one of the oldest models of art, in this relay of significance represented a magnitude bound up with the

past, connected with instincts and drives, something like an opposite of the machine (machine – male invention – potential male re-embodiment, in the sense that Andy Warhol and Sol LeWitt identified with this), which in contrast signalled the future and progress, “the new body of technological society”.<sup>15</sup>

In Filko’s environments, one may see a kind of model of the virtual world – as if the soft materials (textiles, curtains, clothes) transmitted a feminine quality and contrastingly, the hard, metallic and glazed materials, including objects (chess pieces) and instruments (a chandelier emitting rays; a diaprojector), created an equivalent of the male principle. This combination was by no means unusual in the contemporary art world. Indeed, as Carol Duncan has noted in her essay on “The MoMA’S Hot Mamas”, the masculine obsession with the sexualised female body and on the other hand, simultaneously, “the drive for abstract, transcendent truth, may also speak of these fears in the very act of fleeing the realm of matter (mater) and biological need that is woman’s traditional domain.” They both constituted two parts of a psychologically integrated whole among modern male artists.<sup>16</sup>

For Filko, the relationship of man and woman was one of the important problems that had to be investigated, in the time-line of the vector leading to the future. Further confirmation of this may be found in the concept of his interactive *Dwellings of Present-day Reality* (1966–1967, Prague). In its heterogeneous clutter, the arrangement of the interior – altars on the walls, shrines mounted from a variety of fragments, hanging clothes and mirroring floor – was more reminiscent of a junk shop. Ultimately, even the integrated “waiting action” *Duo* (a dialogue of two living statues: the artist and a young woman) indicated a note of parody directed at the traditional form of cohabitation of the couple. Confirmation of their permanent bond by the shared furniture (prefigured in the *Room of Love* environment by twin beds) came across rather as a vestige and a thing of the past.

In most of his environments from these years, Filko tended more to a simplified, reduced vision of space, where admiration was expressed for new technologies and for the development of mankind’s rational capacities; this was connected also with his programmatic distancing from craftsmanship and “handiwork”. The original assemblage of varied materials into structurally diverse objects, culminating in the installation *Dwellings of Present-day Reality*, were replaced by simple airy settings, a sort of elementary architectural cells with slight constructions evoking something like a modern “sacral” space (e.g. *Cathedral of Humanism*, 1968). With their semi-transparent textile strips dangling from metal frames, with their mirror tiles on the floor, these shrines were in a way an enthusiastic symbol of revitalisation of the social function of art, of “a new mode of life”, an echo of “healthy modernism”. Their geometry, with its unified forms, took initiative by defining the limits of the modern games of the senses prepared for viewers, which were waiting within. (...)

However, women as “symbol of humanity” remained only a painted decoration on curtains and beds. Her colourful symbol, recurring like a refrain on the transparent pendant bands of fabrics, was of the same breed as her emblematic figure superimposed as a grid on the profiled surfaces of inflatable mattresses and synthetic flooring. By its multiplication, the female body deprived of individuality was made even more banal, objectified still further, representing only one of a series of other attributes, one of the shadows on the wall of Filko’s version of “the Platonic cave.”

15 Donald Kuspit, *Idiosyncratic Identities. Artists at the End of the Avantgarde* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 214.

16 Carol Duncan, “The MoMA’S Hot Mamas,” *Art Journal* 48, no. 2 (1989): 172.

The question remains: to whom was Filko principally addressing his environments? What visitor did he envisage when he said that this same visitor “becomes a living sculpture in a setting full of other artefacts”?<sup>17</sup> Was he not, once again, giving principal importance to the male viewer? Paradoxically, although these environments (conceived from a masculine position) were devised rather for a man, the photographs in his artist’s catalogue show young girls moving around in them as extras. Ultimately, it would seem, Filko preferred attractiveness and decorative beauty to “reason” when it came to presenting his documentation.

Setting out from an interpretation of gender positions, one may read Filko’s environments as significant structures situating and constructing the duality of male-female relationships, in the sense of guarding the patriarchal system. In the context of this system, a woman is unauthorised and illegitimate; she does not represent but is herself represented. She is an object for hanging (decoration) and lying flat (enjoyment). Situated in a passive rather than active role, more as object than subject, in Kate Linker’s words, she represents “a constant point” of male appropriation in society, where “all representation can be said to entail subject positioning; the subject is at once placed in, or by, the discourse and constructed in, or by, the discourse.”<sup>18</sup>

But in the tension between the spirituality of form and the material principle, between the attempt to objectify the female body, distance oneself from it and at the same time remain in the snares of its sexuality – in the struggle between eroticism and technology, it is the second of these that ultimately triumphs. (...)

In a triumph of reason so conceived, women as a symbol of “eroticism” and “humanity” seemed to have no place... Indeed, in his later works, Filko renounces not only the female body, but even the corporeality as such. This is done, to begin with, in the name of conceptual discipline, as he moves towards a cosmically transcendental dematerialisation of “pure emotion”; again, later on, it is done in the name of pure expression, with his return to subjectivity. The early sexual tension is replaced first by text, then by a monochrome asceticism, and finally by a free-flowing, explosively coloured, vital-instinctual, Nirvana sensuality, unfettered from the iconic (signifying) symbol of the female body. Or, putting it more precisely, Filko dissolved its shapes and its corporeality for good and all in the grandiose corporeality and materiality of “fine art.”

17 Stano Filko, *Stano Filko II 1965-69* (Bratislava: A-Press, 1970).

18 Kate Linker, “Representation and Sexuality,” in *Art after Modernism. Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 392.



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# ACTION ART OF THE 1960s AND 1970s / PLACES (OF ACTION/CRIME)

(SHORTENED)

In the second half of the 20th century, there was a need to disrupt the border between art and life, which had been maintained for centuries. Artists decided to take art out of the safety of galleries and stages into the streets and nature. In this way, they disrupted not only the context of perception, but also the roles of artist and viewer that had been firmly separated until then. In Action Art, as we used to call this broad art movement, the viewer became a participant and often a co-creator of the work of art. This work of art took many forms and could take place in all imaginable and unimaginable places. In the Czech environment, this method of artistic work began in the 1960s. Due to the political and social situation, as well as alternative neo-avant-garde approaches, few events took place within established art institutions. On the contrary, due to its experimental and conceptual nature or the desire to once again connect art enclosed in the white walls of galleries with living everyday life in the best sense of the word, action art was destined to explore new contexts. It was essentially art in the public space, although in many cases it was constituted by “virtue out of necessity.” However, a number of events applied the intention to extend the scope of art to casual passers-by or to rediscover nature as an important living space.

The gallery space, functioning as a public place for the presentation of art since the 19th century, was a context from which action artists sought to break out. In addition, Czech art, despite some relaxation in the second half of the 1960s, was in the grip of totalitarian censorship, so gallery operations were closed to most progressive approaches. The only exception was a few events at the Václav Špála Gallery in Prague, which was managed by Jindřich Chalupecký in the second half of the 1960s. For example, he gave space to the young creator of happenings, Eugen Brikcius, to realize *Belonging to the Idea of an Image* (1967), and in 1969 he invited Zorka Ságlová to the Jiří and Béla Kolář exhibition *Někde něco / Something somewhere*. Here, she created the legendary environment *Seno sláma / Hay Straw* (1969), the principle

1 The text was originally published in: Pavlína Morganová, “Místa činu, akční umění 60. a 70. let,” in *Místa počínů: Historie výstavních prostorů u nás od 19. st. po současnost*, ed. Ondřej Horák (Praha: Komunikační prostor Školská 28, 2010), 53-62.



of which was to allow viewers a ritual associated with drying, raking and turning the grass right in the gallery. She brought yellow bales of straw and green bales of dried alfalfa to Špála gallery, and throughout the exhibition, she scattered, raked and turned them over with the audience in the morning, and piled them into piles in the evening as in a field. This, by Czech standards, radical action, the connections of which can be found not only in the context of current trends at the time such as American Land Art and European Arte Povera, is essentially a return to something completely traditional. Zorka Ságlová grew up in a peasant family, and raking hay was one of her favorite activities. That's how she brilliantly managed to connect art and life, or rather to show that life is more than art.

As part of Czech Action Art, we can find several more actions that were realized in the gallery space, always thanks to the exceptional courage of its curators. For all of them, I would like to mention Jiří Valoch in the House of Arts of the City of Brno, who, for example, in 1970 facilitated the *Eight-Hour Exhibition* of Dalibor Chatrný. However, if we begin to map the use of the urban environment, we must also first mention Vladimír Boudník, who at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s realized dozens of public events in the centre of Prague proclaiming the idea of his artistic direction “explosionalism.” In a letter dated February 23, 1960, he wrote: “In the years 1949-53, we realized approximately 120 artistic breakthroughs. More than a hundred people were often present (this was of great importance for the suppression of conventions.) We mostly painted and drew in Týnská Street, Old Town Square, Kampa, Karlova Street, in the arcade at Malý Ryneček, Uhelný trh, Mariánské náměstí, in Valdštejnská Street, in Holešovice and in stress of Libeň.” The events, during which the artist outlined shapes emerging from the peeling plaster in order to prove to passers-by that each of us is gifted with the gift of imagination, cannot, however, be confused with later happenings. With that being said, it is necessary to mention them as part of this, because they radically expanded the contemporary context.

The first Czech place in the art of the event belongs to Milan Knížák and the group *Aktual /Aktuální umění*. Milan Knížák's early work developed from the location of his apartment-studio in Nový svět in Prague. The then-unsuccessful adept of painting approached the procedures of action art already in the first half of the 1960s as part of his “short-term exhibitions.” The space of the small apartment did not suit his artistic activity, so he started painting and assembling his works right on the street in front of the house. The magic of the public space gradually allowed him to free himself from other artistic conventions. First, he started to create various clusters of things on the street, which made the everyday environment special and provoked a new perception of it. Sometimes, within these short-term exhibitions or installations, a human figure also appeared, which usually remained in a certain position or gesture and was an integral part of the environment, which disturbed and provoked. Specializing and tearing a small section of reality out of its mundaneness are, I think, are the main principles of Knížák's action art of the 1960s.

In 1964, the activity of the group began, the members of which, in addition to Knížák, were Jan and Vít Machová, Jan Trtílek and Soňa Švecová. They wrote a manifesto of current art and demonstratively read it at the *First Manifestation of Current Art*, which took place again in the Nový svět / New World. They started publishing a samizdat magazine and mainly organizing street manifestations, demonstrations and walks, as they were called at the time. In essence, it was about happenings, as Allan Kaprow defined this art form at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s. At this time,

however, Knížák was not yet in contact with the international Fluxus movement, until later he became an important member of it. Among the early collective actions of the Aktual group, I would like to mention the *Actual Walk* in Nový svět, which took place on December 13, 1964, in the vicinity of Nový svět street. A walk was prepared for the participants with unconventional attacks on their individual senses, a person was lying on the pavement playing the double bass, another bed was made and the participants were locked for a while in a dark room where perfume was spilled. Then, in a small space in Nový svět, the organizers in special clothes were encouraged to do meaningless activities and actions. The Nový svět / New World thus became the scene of one of the first happenings in Czech art.

Then, on December 16, 1964, the *Demonstration of One* took place. This event was realized by Knížák himself on street 17. November, near today's Palach Square in Prague. He turned into a shaman, who in a special costume performs a mysterious ritualized activity (he lies on the pavement and slowly reads a book, the pages of which he slowly tears out). However, at the same time it provokes and tests random viewers, whom it invites on a makeshift sign: "I ask passers-by to croak, if possible, when passing by this place." With his unusual behavior, he takes them out of their everyday life and thus demonstrates the ideas that also appear in the group's manifesto.

In 1964 and 1965, together with the group Aktual, Knížák realized a number of other events – the *Second Manifestation of Actual Art*, *the Game of Soldiers*, *the Demonstration for JM*. From our point of view, the most interesting are probably *A Walk in Prague* (1965) and an *Event for the Post Office, Public Safety, Residents of House No. 26 A, for their Neighbors, Relatives and Friends* (1966). *The Walk through Prague* was a comprehensive all-day event for which the participants received precise instructions in advance. On Sunday, December 5, 1965, they were supposed to go around the block where their house stood three times, before meeting at the National Theater in special clothes with a chosen object pinned to it. After meeting with the condition of silence, everyone was then supposed to walk along Národní Avenue and go around the circles that they had painted on the sidewalk with chalk. He was supposed to go to the Čas cinema in Mústek and impose his chosen subject on a neighbour. Then, he was supposed to go to the Main Railway Station and go one or two stations to one of the peripheral stations. From there, he had to get to the ZOO as quickly as possible, where he had a meeting with the other participants in the predator pavilion. With them, bound by a rope, he returned via Stromovka Park to the Exhibition Centre (then the Park of Culture and Relaxation of Julius Fučík). The most important moment of the event was supposed to be its conclusion, when the participants left as alone and silently as they had come. The experience of standing out from the crowd and making reality special should not dissolve into talking, on the contrary, the event should remain at the level of ritual seriousness. The fact that she was dispersed by the police already on Národní Avenue, when alert citizens drew attention to strange persons walking in a circle, will not change anything.

The second mentioned event was prepared by Milan Knížák and Jan Mach for the residents of a randomly selected house in Prague 6. Individual residents of the house were sent a large number of parcels with different contents, so that on the day of delivery they decorated the premises of the house with chairs, coats hanging on the walls, scattered books, calendars, paper swallows. However, these interventions were not met with the understanding of the tenants, so the action was continued at a house meeting with the participation of the authors and Public Security. It is questionable whether any of the participants of this happening still live in this house a short distance from Hradčanská (Václavkova 26).

Practising Action Art at that time was not a simple matter, which is also proven by the work of Eugene Brikcius. His happening *Thanksgiving* (1967), for which he chose the romantic spaces of the Ledeburgh Garden, even had a judicial ending. Participants with loaves of bread gathered in Motol district, from there took a tram to Strelecký Island and then walked to the Ledeburgh Garden. There they were to become part of a festive ritual – each one climbing the stairs and placing his bread at the feet of the girl sitting in the baroque arch at the top of the garden. However, a number of them were arrested again because they were doing something that deviated unconventionally. Staged ritualism and mystification were typical for Brikcius's happenings, as well as the careful selection of the environment in which they took place. I can mention, for example, *Still Life with Beer at Kampa* (1967) or *Picnic on the Castle Steps* (1968).

At the end of the 1960s, the happening began to move out of the city. Brikcius realizes *Sun Hours* (1970) in Roztoky near Prague, and Zorka Ságlová invites her friends to *Throw Balls in the Bořín Pond* in Průhonice (1969). These events have the character of a collective happening, but they move from the center to the periphery, to the imaginary border between the city and nature. At the turn of the 1970s, Ságlová created two important events that work with the principle of specializing the natural environment through human intervention. In *Tribute to Gustav Obermann* (1970), she lit several fires on the snow plain on the hill near Bransoudov near Humpolec, where she came from. The original intention to create unusual traces of fire in the deep snow initially had sculptural and Land Art connotations, but it gradually took on other dimensions. During the preparation, Ságlová learned that the place she chose for the event was still a place of pagan mysteries in the 13th century and probably one of the points in the system of fires on the hills. So, she ended up naming the event after a local cobbler who was known to have fun spitting fire.

Even her *Kladení plín u Sudoměře* (1970) included several levels of meaning an effort to visually transform the landscape, a relationship to history. The event took place at the site of the legendary Hussite battle and included a personal experience – Ságlová had a small child at the time, for whom she washed and bleached diapers every day. In 1972, she still realized *Tribute to Fafejt*, which took place at the abandoned fortress of Vřísek near Česká Lípa, where participants threw inflated condoms. This event took place in a wider circle around the groups Plastic People of the Universe and The Primitives Group. It was named after a Prague druggist who came up with original advertising slogans for condoms. It is documented in a short black and white film, so it is possible to imagine its social and aesthetic dimension even today. The bands mentioned also belonged to the circle of the *Křižovnická school of pure humor without jokes*, or the so-called KŠ. This very diverse and loosely organized group met in Prague pubs in the days of the toughest normalization and with its alternative lifestyle formed a background for a number of important personalities of the artistic underground of that time. The atmosphere of the meeting was inextricably linked to the environment of the Czech pub and the unfavorable political situation of the early 1970s. And so, if we leave aside classic KŠ events such as *Fando, don't be angry, Beer in art* or *Křižovnický calendar* (1972), which took place directly in the pub, collectively organized events also took place outside the city. We should especially mention the patriotic trips organized by Olaf Hanel *The Vltava is legendary Tribute to B. Smetana* (1974), when the participants took a rented bus to the springs of the Vltava or to the mountain Blaník – *Buzení blanických rytířů* / (1974). They were also accompanied by performances of tribal bands – *Sen noci svatojánské / Dream of St. John's Night* band and Plastic People of the Universe.

In the early 1970s, a number of collective events of the KŠ were created, which had a similar character to the events of Zorka Ságlová and took place outside the city. Their goal was to aesthetically transform the landscape and at the same time let their friends and acquaintances experience something interesting. For all of them, I would like to mention *Airport for Clouds* (1970) realized by one of the directors of KŠ Jan Steklík at Lemberk Castle and *Tribute to the Bright Stars* (1972) by Olaf Hanel at Světlá nad Sázavou. However, the activities of the Young Friends of Visual Arts club at the House of Arts of the City of Brno also deserve attention. The central figure of this circuit was Jiří Valoch, who continued the activities of the club with the group *Group m*. In their *Snow day* (1971), for example, the snowy environment was transformed throughout the day with the help of human intervention. Apart from visual and aesthetic intervention, the purpose of the event was primarily active collective participation. In addition to the venue and the conceptual level of the action, this social dimension was extremely important in the timelessness of normalization. There was no need for a permit, a studio, or a gallery or money to realize action art just enthusiasm and the desire to do SOMETHING. In addition, the Land Art method of execution was very current at the time. The idea that a sculpture can be a reshaped or specialized landscape opened up unprecedented possibilities for art. In Czech conditions, it was not possible to create such monumental works as in American Land Art, and neither the social or economic situation of the country, nor the local picturesque landscape, allowed it. However, the dimension of land art activity was connected with the awakening of ecological awareness and the feeling that man, despite his civilizational maturity, is still a part of nature, which has its own immutable laws. The process of creation and destruction of land art works, which were mostly left to their own fate in nature, once again reminded man of his place on Earth.

Since the beginning of the 1970s, many events of an individual nature have also taken place in nature. Although from the beginning the natural environment played a major role, the emphasis was gradually placed on the individual experience of it. It is this combination of Land Art attitudes with Body Art that is typical for Czech art of the 1970s. We can start with the *Transfer of Stones* (1971) by Petr Štembera, who transferred two larger stones from Suchdol near Prague to Dejvice district. We can continue with Jan Mlčoch's *Ascent of Kotel Mountain* (1974) or Jaroslav Anděl's *Journey by Karel Hynek Mácha* (1976), who, according to Mácha's records, went from Prague to Bezděz and then to the Giant Mountains. We can also mention Miloš Šejn's actions, in which he systematically explored, experienced and recorded important natural locations from the end of the 1960s (caves in Bohemian Paradise, Zebín hill near Jíčín, Javořího potok / Javoří gorge in the Giant Mountains, Mažarná in Velká Fatra). The connection of the perception of physicality with nature is perhaps most striking in the series of actions *Kontakty* (1979-80), realized in the Šumava by Milan Kozelka. The first action of this cycle was the night he spent stretched out on two logs across the Hamerský stream and watched the rolling flow of water. This was followed by *Standing in rapids*, *Hanging*, *Walking upstream*, *Damming* and *Hoisting*. All these seemingly simple actions required a lot of physical effort and were quite risky. They were not only about physical contact with the predatory current of the river Vydra, but also about psychological perception of experienced situations and verification of one's physical capabilities.

Kozelka's actions have a clear starting point in Body Art, as represented here in the 1970s by Body Art by three persons in Prague (Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch). In the 1970s, their events took place in various spaces, whether it was abandoned city corners or unused (often basement) spaces where they worked. From



the beginning, these were rather private events, in which only they themselves participated, and they often involved basic explorations of being or the relationship between the body and space. The relationship with nature was then manifested in two early actions by Petr Štembera *Stepping* (1975) and *Sleeping on a tree* (1975), documented in a typical way for Body Art – selected black and white photographs and a short text describing what happened when and how. For example, we learn about *Sleeping on a Tree* that took place in April 1975 in Prague, when “After three days and nights without sleep, I spent the fourth night on a tree.”

The *Grafting* event, in which Štembera had a branch grafted into his hand in the usual way in orchards, was realized with the assistance of Jan Mlčoch in an abandoned house on the Vltava embankment near Letná. Another example is Jan Mlčoch's early event *The Hanging – The Big Sleep* (1974), which took place on the grounds of St. Agnes Monastery in the National Gallery, where the actor worked as a depository administrator at the time. Blindfolded and earplugged, the silent man was hung by his hands and feet in a disused attic space. He thus reached a state of pure being, where he could detach himself from his physicality for a while, but at the same time experience it in an extreme way. Although the event lasted only a few minutes, it is one of the most interesting Czech Body Art performances.

Other events took place, for example, in the basement of the Uměleckoprůmyslové muzeum / Art and Industry Museum, where Petr Štembera once worked as a night porter. They already had a small circle of spectators who regularly came to the performance evenings. These were often risky ventures in which the actors explored the limits of their own bodies. Since 1977, the Collections of Modern Art of the National Gallery have been held in the unused rooms of the Municipal Library, where Jiří Kovanda worked as a depository administrator. However, unlike Mlčoch and Štembera, he realized his first events directly on the street. Two events from 1976 that he carried out on Wenceslas Square are worth mentioning. *Divadlo / Theatre* was a short performance not far from the National Museum, during which Kovanda performed a series of precisely prepared movements, but their ordinariness completely belied the fact that it was a public performance. Even another action, during which Kovanda spread his arms for a moment against the crowd rushing down Wenceslas Square, was difficult to grasp due to the ordinariness of the gesture. Although it was only a small moment when this artist tried to “open up” to the people around him for a while, the photograph captures the iconic situation of a person turning away from the crowd, surrendering to this world with the gesture of the crucified.

Since the events of Milan Knížák and Eugen Brikcius, this was the first event at Kovanda right in the city centre. Unlike the romantic corners of the New World and Kampa, he went directly to the most exposed streets. Here he worked with the most delicate gestures, as on the escalator in Wenceslas Square, when he turned and looked into the eyes of the person standing behind him (*Untitled*, 1977) or in Vodičková and Spálená Street, as if casually bumping into people (*Kontakt*, 1977). The last place where events of the Prague Body Art circuit took place at the end of the 1970s was a small abandoned room in Provaznická Street in Můstek. Petr Štembera's performances *Untitled – Two-Part Performance* (1978) and *Untitled – Arrows* (1979), *Untitled – Spray* (1979), as well as Kovanda's first “minimal installation” were also held here. His *Installation I* (1978) consisted in the fact that in the empty space of the room, the author placed a flower in a pot behind a column so that visitors could not see it. In this way, he began to address the feeling of exhaustion from tense point actions, which, although they had a great charge in the period's marasmus, were perceived by the end of the 1970s as a certain introspective exhibitionism. It should be noted

that at that time a number of Charter 77 signatories were in real political danger, and performance slowly became institutionalized. Štembera and Mlčoch were invited to a number of foreign galleries. From today's point of view, it is clear that Kovanda's unobtrusive interventions, for which he used the most ordinary objects (sugar, salt, string) both indoors and outdoors throughout the 1980s and 1990s, were the starting point for the neo-conceptual practices of the later younger generation of artists.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Action Art appeared as a current form of expression. Its position became equal among other means of expression, it no longer shocked so much. Its use had rules set by the artists of the sixties and seventies, but it continued to allow experimentation, deviating from the norm, involving the viewer, discovering new places. I just want to add that I used the pun called *Crime Scenes* as a metaphor for the legendary German crime series that has entertained TV viewers since the seventies. An event is an act in a certain place, and a specific place plays the most important role in it, alongside the actors and co-actors. Also, the event itself is a much more complex form than a traditional art artifact, not only the person of the creator, the chosen material and form, but also the position of the viewer, his mood, the space in which it takes place, the weather and many other aspects are important. Simply put, "here and now", which is essentially an intersection marking a certain place in space-time.



FEMINISM

# POLITICS OF THE BODY IN CONTEMPORARY VIDEO ART IN SLOVAKIA

(SHORTENED)

The politics of identity, the body, corporeality, and reflection on gender questions, are among the relevant themes of contemporary video art in Slovakia. This art form has flourished widely since the 1990s, facilitated by the freedom that exists in a democratic society. In contrast to the United States of America, where feminist art began to develop in the late 1960s, this did not occur in Slovakia until 1989. As is widely known, a different sociopolitical development prevailed in former socialist Czechoslovakia, where all areas of human activity (and specifically culture) were under the supervision of the Communist Party. In this context, any forms of art promoting the ideas of feminism were impermissible and regarded as an import of capitalism. The brief period of liberalisation of society, bringing a whiff of freedom, culminated in the Prague Spring of 1968; following the intervention of the Soviet Bloc armies in August 1968. This gave way to a period of unfreedom that lasted over 20 years, with restricted opportunities for artists to confront even the domestic viewing public, let alone the world. Even in the setting of “alternative culture”, there was no programmatic specification of questions connected with feminist art, even though the artists in this milieu defied the regime’s narrowness with their civic attitudes. Besides, in this community men predominated: there was only a minority representation of female artists.<sup>2</sup>

When Czechoslovakia, post-November 1989, committed itself to building democracy and an open civic society, together with the free market economy, all the accompanying features of mass culture characteristic of capitalist society began to develop also: advertising, show business, and the expansion of private and satellite television stations, orientated principally towards relaxation and diversion.<sup>3</sup>

1 The article was originally published in Katarína Rusnáková, “Politika tela v súčasnom videoumení na Slovensku,” *Ars* 41, no. 2 (2008): 290-304. Katarína Rusnáková is the author of the first publication devoted to the History and Theory of Media Art in Slovakia (published in 2006). She has been addressing questions of video art since the 1990s. The author is examining the work of selected artists from the perspective of feminism and queer theory. We are publishing an abridged version.

2 Jana Geržová, “Art and the Question of Gender in Slovak Art,” *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal* 8 (2001): 74-82.

3 See e.g. Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1967); Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. USA (London:

These forms of advertising presented images of women that were for the most part idealised. On the one hand, they offered the ceaselessly inflected myth of beauty, based on a flawless face and a slim young female body; on the other hand, they provided images of the attentive wife, mother, and housekeeper – and in both cases these merely confirmed oversimplified ideas about women. Global capitalism with its consumerist mode of life, which rapidly infiltrated the chaotic structure of collapsing socialism, was thus mixed with the new economic, political and sociocultural phenomena that accompanied the processes of transformation. Its influence on the quality of social, inter-human and partner relationships was by no means negligible.

The quest for identity is becoming an important theme in video art and media art. In postmodern times, identity is distinguished by a plural, unstable and fluid nature,<sup>4</sup> and its formation is linked with the phenomenon of power in the private and public spheres. The artists who responded most effectively to these new cultural phenomena were the women who entered the art scene during the 1990s. Besides exploring identity, many of them engage in critical reflection on the portrayal of women by the media and mass culture, among other things, undermining patriarchal stereotypes and conventional ideas about women and their social roles. Also pertaining to this iconosphere are themes associated with breaking the taboos on sexuality and visual portrayal of erotic life from a perspective of female experience, as well as views of domesticity or the household and family space, in terms of a changed quality of partner relationships.

If we proceed from the assumption that feminism is innately subject to change, we can say that the radicalism of late 1960s/early 1970s feminists is absent from feminist perception in the 1990s art. The latter has a different character, corresponding to the contemporary socio-cultural and socio-political realities. Rather than taking its starting point from the sexual differences of men and women, it works with gender identity on a more structured level. Gender identity is regarded as a social and cultural construct because apart from the biological aspects, broader social and cultural factors also have contributed to its formation.<sup>5</sup> The latter feminism furthermore concerns itself with visibility and the gaze of the looking viewer. A distinction is made between looking and the “male gaze”,<sup>6</sup> which is a fixed male stare focused on the portrayed object, embodying sexual desire. “Male gaze” often includes aspects of power and appropriation from the one who is gazing. Hence, just as postmodernism generally effaces binary oppositions, it also relativises the heterosexual matrix of gender that comprises only the man – woman opposition and extends it with other sexual orientations: lesbian, gay and transsexual, categories for whom the term “queer” had been commonly used.<sup>7</sup> Currently, this term expresses belonging with a chosen community, as well as reflecting the opinion that dividing the world into homosexual and heterosexual is unacceptable because sexual identities and communities are so diverse.<sup>8</sup>

Penguin, 1985); Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'Ère du vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain* (Gallimard, 1983); Václav Bělohradský, *Společnost nevolnosti. Eseje z pozdější doby* (Praha: SLON, 2007).

4 Wolfgang Welsch, *Estetické myslenie* (Bratislava: Archa, 1993), 123-47.

5 According to Laura Meyer, feminist theory divides into an essentialist approach expressing the power of women, in opposition to which there is a second approach, feminist deconstruction. Laura Meyer, “Power and Pleasure: Feminist Art Practice and Theory in the United States and Britain,” in *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 317-19.

6 Nicolas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader* (London-New York: Routledge, 2001), 391-516.

7 Leila J. Rupp, *Vytoužená minulost. Dějiny lásky a sexuality mezi osobami stejného pohlaví v Americe od příchodu Evropanů po současnost* (Praha: One Woman Press, 2001), 244-45.

8 Ibid., 244-55.

Judith Butler argues that gender identity is necessarily an unstable, unfinished and performative category, which subjects may change during their lives.<sup>9</sup>

The change in the content of feminism at the turn of the 1990s was not merely projected into the modes of portrayal of current themes: it was also reflected in the terminological definition of this stage of feminism in art. One may consider the two terms “post-feminism”<sup>10</sup> and “gender art”.<sup>11</sup> These concepts (both have international validity) designate the art of women and men who are thematising gender questions. Those issues are articulated having regard to the specifics of the local context, and the statements of the artists carry the local colouring of their idiolects as well as their significative contents.

Marcia Tucker regards post-feminism as a further developmental stage of feminism, which relates to the art developing from the late 1990s. She adverts to the fact that feminism bears a variety of forms and names, and she does not believe that its ideas would ever die as long as even a single trace of inequality between the sexes existed in the world that we live in. Not only women, Marcia Tucker believes, but men also should take account of these problems because feminism, like every important movement for equal rights and civic freedoms, needs to have as many advocates as possible – hence not only women, but also heterosexual men, gay-identifying, lesbian-identifying, or heterosexual women and people of different races.<sup>12</sup> According to Tucker, it is important that East European women should initiate their activities without letting the West speak for them.<sup>13</sup>

### Identity, Body, and Gender Questions from the Perspective of Women

One of the key figures in video art in Slovakia is Jana Želibská (1941), whose ironic video installations consider the familiar men’s view of women as beautiful, sexually attractive objects. Simultaneously, with a humorous detachment, Želibská questions the reductive formulae via which women are perceived in society, and which inform their visual portrayals not only in media, advertising, television and films, but even in art history, since from time immemorial women have been portrayed as passive objects of the sexual desire of male artists and not as equal partners. In this connection, one cannot overlook Laura Mulvey’s influential essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). Mulvey, a film-maker and theorist of film and culture, declares that the Hollywood film, as modern patriarchal visual culture, is generally

9 Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan, eds., *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon, 2001), 43; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York-London: Routledge, 1990).

10 The term “post-feminism” first appeared in the late 1980s in the American media, where it was proclaimed that the feminist movement had passed its peak because women had achieved equal status. These misleading opinions met with a critical response, and part of the expert community rejected this concept. However, the term “post-feminism” was accepted by prominent intellectuals to express an anti-essentialist approach. Martina Pachmanová, *Věrnost v pohybu. Hovory o feminizmu, dějinách a vizualitě* (Praha: One Woman Press, 2001), 234.

11 The concept of gender, originally a grammatical expression for sexual difference, proceeds from the assumption that femaleness and maleness are social constructions. Gender has fundamentally extended the framework for feminist research and has offered a critical model for examining the relationship between men and women, while cancelling the binary oppositions of masculine/feminine and accepting a pluralist model of diverse sexual identities (queer art). This extended research includes examination of further gender-connected aspects such as race, class, ethnicity, and nationality. See *ibid.*, 230-31.

12 Marcia Tucker, “Múzeum, moc a odpovědnost aneb Svět, ve kterém žijeme,” in *Věrnost v pohybu. Hovory o feminizmu, dějinách a vizualitě*, ed. Martina Pachmanová (Praha: One Woman Press, 2001), 195.

13 *Ibid.*, 194.

structured in accordance with the domination of masculine viewing. This “male gaze” imposes its power by asserting a claim to spectacle, where the central focus is the portrayal of a woman as a sexual object or a fetish.<sup>14</sup> Želibská contributed to this theme with *Her View of Him* (1996), a video installation where she focused her camera on the naked body of a man showering. Thereby, her large-screen projection became a kind of parody on the “male gaze” and voyeurism. The video’s first sequences introduce the viewer to the intimacy of the bathroom, where the author emphasises the details of the bath, evoking phallic associations, using an erotic song by Serge Gainsbourg. After this overture, the showering man appears; the song is replaced by the sound of flowing water, and fragments of the man’s body alternate with details of phallic metaphors in the bathroom’s equipment. The scene ends with the man disappearing and a view of the empty bathtub, where two balls of polymer clay are rolling towards the drainpipe. Contributing to the overall erotic atmosphere in the video, there are two pairs of balls with the shower hose between them, reminiscent of museum specimens of some kind; these are installed on glass shelves on the wall, illuminated by red light bulbs. Želibská’s video installation may be regarded on the one hand as a deconstruction of female bathroom scenes created by male artists (e.g. Tom Wesselmann or George Segal); on the other hand, this work is a dialogue with Bill Viola’s video installation *Interval* (1995), where likewise the main actor is a man showering. In the 1990s, she continued creating video installations, where she concentrated on examining changes of identity in women in a period full of uncertainties and doubts. Puberty is one such time (*Sisters II*, 1999): with delicate irony Želibská interprets the maturing of the girls and examines their identity in the stage of transition between youth and adulthood.<sup>15</sup> In a further video installation *On a Diet* (1995), she looks ironically at the cult and myth of female beauty, promoted by the advertising and fashion industries (using visual images of women who are perfect, but remote from everyday life).

Typical of the video art of Pavlína Fichta Čierna (1967) is a penetrating look beneath the surface of social reality, with the focus on the human subject. One of her favourite media, since 2002, has been documentary video films, where she relates stories of people who have equivocal, complicated life histories. The artist finds her protagonists mainly on the city periphery, marginal to the interest of the social majority and outside the attention of the media. They include, firstly, men and women who are physically and mentally handicapped; secondly, outsiders living their lives in a non-conforming manner that eludes the contemporary consumerist lifestyle. Her free cycle begins with the video cycle *Janka Saxonová* (2002), which is a portrait of a mentally afflicted woman, presented via a register that conveys one day of her ordinary life. The slowed-down tempo of the video, with deliberate interruptions in the form of snowing between individual sequences, suggests a multi-significant reading of the concept of “breakdown” which accurately corresponds with its content. *With Maroš* (2003) is another video film with a similar narrative content, where Čierna has entrusted the camera to a handicapped but vital fifty-year-old man; via a commented tour, he is enabled to convey one day in his daily round, from home to the centre of town and back, to the viewers. This video story, which also includes

14 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York Oxford University Press, 1999), 833-44.

15 Želibská’s video installation *Sisters II* (1999, Cik-Cak Centre, Bratislava, curator Z. Baratošová) is a continuation of a free diptych, based on which the video projection *Sisters I* (1997), conceived in the spirit of *cinéma-vérité*, was presented at the exhibition *Between Man and Woman* at Považská Art Gallery in Žilina in 1997 (curator Katarína Rusnáková).

some funny passages, tests the patience and tolerance of viewers for the otherness of disabled people, while at the same time laying bare their limits, which often consist of pseudo-problems. Čierna also brings to contemporary video art a vision that takes in the psychological, social, sociological and cultural problems of the Roma ethnic minority: witness the video diptych *Siblings* (2004), which captures the life lived by Roma children on the periphery. This is marked not only by material want, but especially by the absence of a complete family and a lack of positive models. *Jarka in the Midst* presents the tragicomic sides of a teenage girl taking care of three siblings; the companion film *David R. the Juvenile* is played out in prison and offers an account of her younger brother. Čierna focuses especially on the large details of the face and on the gaze of the Roma youngster, whom she catches with the video camera while playing strange, brutal games that help to pass the time of his sentence. Individual études are interrupted by a fadeout reminiscent of a blind being drawn. There is excellent play of light and shade in this video; in a minimalistically defined setting, the dominant feature is the barred window, casting its shadow on the floor; corresponding acoustically to this is the sound of a typewriter, with its associations of interrogation. The video poses many questions, similar to the infinitely many questions hovering over the future of this Roma lad, who has belonged to a group of problematic and socially dependent people since birth. We observe an increase in documentary-style videos, particularly since documenta 11 (2002), which confirmed the tendency to give growing importance to the social and political responsibility of art.<sup>16</sup>

There are female artists of a younger generation who uninhibitedly present disturbing images of the body and sexuality in a provocative spirit, thematising gender questions and negating taboos of whatever kind. Among them are Anetta Mona Chişa (1975) and Lucia Tkáčová (1977). In *What the fuck are you staring at?! (2001)*, a subversive videotape, Chişa addresses two problems which she presents in a laconic, but concise visual transcription. Confronting the familiar modes of receiving artworks in cultural institutions such as galleries and museums of art, she undermines them by introducing subversive elements; and on the other hand, she deconstructs the conventional picture of women regarded as submissive beings and casts doubt on the received norms of “feminine behaviour”. In this action video, an angry, good-looking young woman adopts an aggressive attitude towards viewers and attacks them verbally, hurling vulgar insults at them in the English language. It is obvious that this is no passive beauty, charming those around her with her appearance and refined poses. Quite the contrary: the behaviour of this rebel recalls the well-known controversial appearances of certain pop singers, Madonna for example. Chişa and Tkáčová subvert pornographic films in their *Porn Video* (2004), in which both artists appear simultaneously in the role of actresses imitating the erotic positions and sexual behaviour of couples in porno films, the difference being that they appear in ordinary clothing without any erotic attributes whatever. With an undeniable gift for sarcasm, they simulate the heterosexual connection between a man and a woman, and hence the porn video seems still more comical and absurd, thus undermining its original purpose. Chişa and Tkáčová use the strategy of persiflage to comment ironically on a product which is promoting commercial sex and is therefore meant to evoke erotic desires and sexual excitement and to stimulate the viewers' curiosity and voyeurism. Regarding pornography, the French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky says that its logic is not so much about macho obsession: it bears witness rather to a modern fixation with reality, a desire to surpass all limits, to see everything, show

16 Gregor Muir, “The Documentary Style. Men with a movie camera,” *Flash Art* 36, no. 228 (2003): 79–81.



everything, and instrumentalise everything. In his view, laughter or mockery would be the adequate response of mature feminism to the extremes of hard pornography, with its mechanisation of sex, and many men would join in the ridicule.<sup>17</sup> Chiša and Tkáčová focus their attention on men as potential objects of sexual interest in *Holiday Video* (2004), an ironically pitched work where they address the dilemma: which male artists or curators of the Slovak art scene would they be willing to have sex with? The easy conversational tone and witty innuendos regarding those mentioned are proper to the context: the artists are, after all, analysing and judging the degree of attractiveness of selected men, and in doing so, they merely borrow the strategies that men commonly use in casual talk about women.

In this thematic context, one must mention a video by Eva Filová (1968), *Opportunity to Choose* (2003). Although Filová, whose main areas of interest are installations or billboards in public space, only rarely turns to this medium, her videos likewise proclaim a symbiosis of the political and the personal in art, and they contain sharp criticism of current social and political affairs. *Opportunity to Choose* is conceived as a laconic, terse pictorial documentary, showing the visit of Pope John Paul II to Slovakia in 2003 from a different perspective. This video is structured in three loosely connected passages, to which specific soundtracks correspond. Viewers foremost see the empty spaces of the area for the congregation in Petržalka in Bratislava, which are filling up with people. Pictorial reporting continues with a view of the commercial background: numerous stands are shown, offering refreshment and bizarre kitsch objects including portraits of the Pope, and it ends with shots of young people in T-shirts with the text “Opportunity to Choose”. A characteristic feature of the video is that the typical media images familiar from these mass events are absent – we do not see any congregation, we do not see details of the Pope. However, the featured groups of women have an important testimonial value: with their banners reading “Opportunity to Choose”, they proclaim their free will to make decisions about their bodies based on their judgement. Here they are expressing an individual attitude to the much-discussed problem of prohibition of abortion, which at that time resonated on the political scene and across Slovak society.

The themes we are examining include a special category of “conjugal art.” Erik (1974) and Gabika (1975) Binder are representatives of the kind of professional and life partnership that Lenka Klodová writes about: “As a working definition of ‘conjugal art’, we may say it is art produced in a certain bond, most often institutional, which addresses social, psychological, erotic and gender problems from the position of a lived stereotype.”<sup>18</sup> The Binders are a married couple of artists who, besides individual works, also create joint projects and draw inspiration for them from the mythology of partnership and family. A model specimen is *Sunday Army* (2003), made by Gabika Binderová with her husband Erik. This witty video, where images in real-time motion alternate with accelerated passages of a grotesque character, captures a typical syndrome of Slovak families: preparation of Sunday lunch (pork chops). The story begins its focus on the theme in the butcher’s. Then the viewer’s gaze is directed to a vertical cross-section of tower blocks, a further symbol of post-totalitarian Slovak flat culture, where in the tower block flats’ uniform kitchens it is almost exclusively women who are tenderising chops, beating them with the most bizarre equipment. There and then, they change into an army that takes its “chop-bashing” to the point of destroying the flat building. The video’s conclusion thus evidences the Binder

17 Gilles Lipovetsky, *La Troisième femme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

18 Lenka Klodová, “Autentický žitý stereotyp. Opomíjený fenomén manželského umění,” *Umělec*, no. 1 (2005): 42.

duo's sense of absurdity and black humour, in this ironic take on the patriarchal stereotype of the wife's role in the household. A forerunner of this video was *East Side Story* (2003), insofar as it combined documentary with acted passages. Here the story was told from the female artist's viewpoint: with humorous detachment, she thematised a "private family episode" of the Binder artists with their twin sons, and their adventurous journey by train from Bratislava to eastern Slovakia, where they went to spend the Christmas holidays. (...)

### Forms of Queer Art

Anna Daučíková (1950) is a programmatic feminist and political activist campaigning for equal rights for sexual minorities. In her videos, she interprets models of queer art, while at the same time questioning gender stereotypes and patriarchal thinking patterns. A characteristic feature in many of Daučíková's videos is the artist's ironic manipulation of everyday household objects, fragments of her body, parts of clothing, or trivial materials; these she examines via ambivalent metaphors, and in diverse visual-metaphorical versions she conjugates the problems of corporeality and erotic desire.

This artist evokes sexual associations while simultaneously effacing the clear gender codes, to offer both female and male viewers an open possibility of choosing a plurality of views on gender issues. On this, she herself says: "I want to cast doubt on gender stereotypes, or question the blank spaces in the issue of gender and sexual identity. (...) In 1996, I began quite spontaneously making those 'manipulations', as an examination of corporeality on the one hand and erotic desire minus a clear gender code on the other. Sexuality then appeared as a mental affair. It is the consumer, the viewer, who brings gender into it, and it really is different, depending on whether a heterosexual man, a lesbian, a gay, or a heterosexual woman, is the one looking."<sup>19</sup> One example of thematisation of sexuality is Daučíková's video projection *Malholandrajv* (2003), where she combines found sound from the Lynch film *Mulholland Drive*, presenting the dialogue about lesbian sex with her own visual interpretation of this scene. Daučíková's minimalist but semantically multi-layered pictorial statement, which is a witty obverse of the dramatically progressing dialogue between the two women, is based on a large detail of her hands. They are playing with a knife and a strangely deformed eggshell, reminiscent of the male sexual organ. The artist gives this multi-significant symbol or archetype, loaded with varied connotations, a brief investigative scrutiny, and then with her typical gift for sarcasm smashes it with a vigorous blow of the knife. One can understand this as an allusion to "the Columbus egg", which expresses an intelligent solution to a difficult task. Daučíková is not only being ironic about the loving relationship between two women; her irony, in this many-sided video, is likewise directed towards men.

The specimens considered here represent various forms of video art in Slovakia which reflect the iconosphere of the body, corporeality and gender questions. Even from this selection, it is evident that the particular artists in their individual approaches show a rich variety, inventiveness, sense of experiment, and intertextual discourse.

19 Hana Vaškovičová, "Inbetween (Alterita a identita). Rozhovor s Annou Daučíkovou," *Profil* 7, no. 2-3 (2000): 125.

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# THE GOADING LAUGH OF THE MEDUSA?<sup>1</sup>

(SHORTENED)

Political tension surrounding women's rights is an essential characteristic of the Polish transformation. Two founding gestures are accountable for the transformation as we know it (as regards individual rights, autonomy, subjectivity, and civil liberties including the right to exercise control over one's own body): introducing religious education to schools in 1990 and criminalising abortion in 1993, a procedure which had been entirely legal in the Polish People's Republic. Sacrificing women's rights for the sake of striking a non-aggression pact with the Catholic Church that had played a major societal role in the struggle for democracy, became a structural component of modernisation in Poland. Cultural analysts, including Jan Sowa and Przemysław Czapliński, rightly point out that this modernisation tends to be conceived of as infrastructural and technological improvements which are, however, unaccompanied by a progressive approach to human rights. Individual liberty atrophies – individuality must yield, in moral and existential terms, to the community which leans towards adopting a reactionary and conservative way of constructing itself. Reinforced by a traditionalist ideology informed by religion, contemporary Polish society is exclusive and compensational in nature, with the traditional image of family stressing the reproductive role and subordinate status of women at its core.

Women and their rights are the greatest contradiction within this system. Sacrificial offerings made to cement the new order, they have nevertheless come to pose the gravest threat to it. The doings of the radical right have triggered an avalanche of women's protests on a scale heretofore unknown in Poland's political history. In October 2016, hundreds of thousands of Polish women took to the streets to protest against further restrictions on what is one of Europe's strictest abortion laws. The event known as Black Protest brought forth an otherwise rarely observed direct, if symbolic, response to a political situation from women artists.

## The Trouble with Political Art by Women

To advance my argument, I shall investigate the reception of the *Polish Women, Patriots, Rebels* exhibition curated by Izabela Kowalczyk, hosted by the Arsenal Municipal

<sup>1</sup> The text was originally published in Agata Araszkiewicz, „Szczenie śmiechem Meduzy?,” in *Polki, Patriotki, Rebeliantki...* ed. Iza Kowalczyk (Poznań: Galeria Miejska Arsenal, 2018).

Gallery in Poznań in autumn 2017 as an event related to the Ninth National Congress of Women. Its motto “Women’s Rights Alert” directly referenced the political menace posed by right-wing extremism. Embracing some poignant testimonies to the women artists’ firsthand experience of insecurity in face of the looming abridgment of their right to bodily integrity, the show came under blistering attack from two male critics which, along with the polemics they provoked, accounted for the noteworthy response to the event in its entirety.<sup>2</sup>

What this harsh criticism overlooked was the political context of the transformation and the adverse conditions in which Polish women found themselves as citizens. One author sought to corroborate his far-left stance by accusing the Congress of Women of being too liberal. Having identified two minorities with the most potent voices in contemporary Polish art – women and the LGBTQIA+ community, the other critic endorsed the latter, claiming they were more successful in championing their cause on the ideological and formal level. The work of women artists was played down for its alleged preoccupation with the white-and-red national symbolism, “passivity” that pervaded the artworks and, most of all, patriotic kitschiness.

My reading of the exhibition was the very opposite of the above – where the two authors saw shortcomings and weaknesses, I saw pieces pregnant with meaning and apt observations. Where they found emptiness and ennui, I was excited to discover camp irony and female pathos of deep-seated resentment. The question arising here is whether Polish feminist art is politically “poor” or whether, perhaps, the dominant ways of reception are unable to acknowledge and assimilate its political potential.

In this text I shall inspect one of the most emblematic works displayed at the *Polish Women, Patriots, Rebels* exhibition, a prime example of bad art if we are to believe the critics. It is Iwona Demko’s banner *408,223 Raisings of the Skirt, or My Dream of the Black Protest* (2017), depicting a multiplied image of the artist lifting her skirt in front of the Kraków Cloth Hall to reveal the vagina which, metaphorically naked, is actually covered by a black mandorla.

The multi-instalment dispute that, apart from the two hostile critics, also allowed the curator and me (I had been the one who invited Izabela Kowalczyk to participate in the discussion at the Cultural Centre of the Congress of Women) to express our points of view and took place in *Szum* magazine. Towards the end of the year, the periodical presented a list of the best and worst artworks selected by a number of Polish art critics. The last to voice her opinion in the review that unveiled an enormous wealth and multifaceted dynamism of the contemporary Polish art scene was Karolina Plinta, an art critic writing for *Magazyn Szum*. She described Demko’s work as “the only botch-up of the year” (sic!). Plinta claimed to have been struck by the “massive dose of absurd” administered by the Kraków-based artist “notorious for her

2 One may look up the online versions of *Magazyn Szum* and *Dwutygodnik*: Mikołaj Iwański, “Polki, mieszcanki, liberałki,” *Magazyn Szum* 6.10.2017 <https://magazynszum.pl/polki-mieszcanki-liberalki/> accessed 24.06.2023; Iza Kowalczyk, “Sprostowanie tekstu Mikołaja Iwańskiego ‘Polki, mieszcanki, liberałki’”, *ibid.* 9.10.2017, <https://magazynszum.pl/sprostowanie-tekstu-mikolaja-iwanskiego-polki-mieszcanki-liberalki/>, accessed 23.06.2023; Agata Araszkiewicz, “Kobieca rebelia?... Sztuka i bunt społeczny,” *ibid.* 27.10.2017 <https://magazynszum.pl/kobieca-rebelia-sztuka-i-bunt-spoeczny/>, accessed 24.06.2023. Stach Szablowski, “Od ściany do ściany,” *Dwutygodnik*, no. 221 published electronically 09.2017, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/7394-od-sciany-do-sciany.html>, accessed 24.06.2023. Mikołaj Iwański and Stach Szablowski, “Jak stłuc termometr? Czyli polemiki z Agatą Araszkiewicz,” *Magazyn Szum*, 10.11.2017 <https://magazynszum.pl/w-odpowiedzi-agacie-araszkiewicz/>, accessed 24.06.2023; Agata Araszkiewicz and Iza Kowalczyk, “Deklaracje męskiego ego. Odpowiedź na teksty Stacha Szablowskiego i Mikołaja Iwańskiego”, *Magazyn Szum* published electronically 08.12.2017, <https://magazynszum.pl/deklaracje-meskiego-ego-odpowiedz-na-teksty-stacha-szablowskiego-i-mikolaja-iwanskiego/>, accessed 24.06.2023, 24.06.2023.



obsession with vagina,” who had submitted the work to the *Polish Women, Patriots, Rebels* exhibition to lend her support for the Black Protest, and so “we could (not) see, in a visualisation of her dream, 408,223 censored vaginas of Iwona Demko. Though, if we think clear-headedly about it,” the author continues, “what we are facing is actually more of a nightmare than anything.”<sup>3</sup>

The questions that need to be posed here are: what is this vagina ambush about and can the vagina at all be used to goad?

### **Vagina. An Oneiric Phenomenon or a Nightmare?**

“Possessing a vagina means that I have the unique power to bring new life into the world, yet from birth I was treated differently from people who don’t own one,”<sup>4</sup> writes American sociologist Catherine Blackledge in her famous book *The Story of V. A Natural History of Female Sexuality*. Obviously, differently is synonymous with worse. “Having a vagina meant I could be expected to work all my life for less money (...). I could expect to be treated as a second-class citizen, downgraded constantly because of my cunt. I also recognised that if I’d been born into another society, the implications of having a vagina would have been far more restricting and threatening, potentially fatal.”<sup>5</sup> A platitude to someone who has been dealing with feminism for quite a long time, these words recover their appeal in the context of the fuss kicked up in response to the raising of the skirt.

I can’t think of an artwork kitschier than Gustave Courbet’s *The Origin of the World*, which nevertheless keeps enjoying its status as one of the cult pieces of the 21st century and the entire art history. Its ambivalence is striking. An affirmative depiction of bare female genitals seems consistent with the Suffragette movement and the struggle for women’s political subjectivity in the 19th century. Yet the pubis in the painting is in a recumbent, submissive position, and the thighs of the woman whose body has been left out of the frame except for her crotch are partially open. There is no doubt that the vagina of Courbet’s model is there to please the eye of man, to address his needs. Idealisation goes hand in hand with powerful fetishisation, sexualisation with paternalistic domination. It is all too easy for a depiction of this kind to undergo classicisation because, despite its transgressive nature consistent with the period, it conforms to the convention of representing female nudes as erotic objects under masculine control observed since antiquity.

The vagina in Courbet’s picture elicited multiple responses from contemporary women artists, including Orlan who replaced it with the male member in a piece called *The Origin of War* (the manner of representation exposes the arbitrary nature of Courbet’s vision even more). Not that long ago, in 2014, young Luxembourgian artist Deborah de Robertis entered the Musée d’Orsay which is home to the canvas, sat down under the painting and spread her legs, displaying her naked crotch in a performance act called *The Mirror of Origin...* only to be led out by the police.

Here the work of Valie Export, Ana Mendieta and Carolee Schneemann comes to mind, characterised by a strong vindictive message. For them, vagina was a phantasm of sexual and symbolic violence, an artistic fetish, an affirmation of and demand for a high and autonomous position for women in art. Polish art, from Maria

3 Łukasz Białkowski et al., “Hity, kity, podsumowania. 2017 rok w sztuce,” *Magazyn Szum*, 29.12.2017, <https://magazynszum.pl/hity-kity-podsumowania-2017-rok-w-sztuce/>, accessed 24.06.2023.

4 Catherine Blackledge, *The Story of V: A Natural History of Female Sexuality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 1-2.

5 Ibid., 2.



Pinińska-Bereś's oneiric, soft and organic objects, to Alicja Żebrowska's actions challenging the "metaphysics" of the vagina, was noticeably present on this map.

Iwona Demko's artwork is thus very much in line with the tradition of feminist art which hasn't so far been considered as "universal" as the mainstream rooted in the 19th-century avant-garde. Where Second Wave feminist artists are crudely blunt in their social criticism, Demko uses irony and kitschy literality. In response to the notion that possessing a vagina makes us second-class citizens, the artist postulates instant revaluation of traditional hierarchies. The question that arises here is whether it is possible for a gesture as simple as hers to deconstruct and incapacitate the complex dynamics behind the oppression of female sexuality.

### **New Vaginismus,<sup>6</sup> or Book with a Hole**

Biological sciences "discovered" vagina late. Philosophy and psychoanalysis were hardly any better – centuries elapsed between Aristotle calling the female a "deformed male," and Freud formulating his theory that "a little girl was a little boy;" in both cases, the hierarchical approach to sexes kept up the pretence of neutral ahistoricity. Vagina was believed to be a defective (bleeding) organ, an atrophied form of the "complete" male member. Freud even came up with the metaphor of castration to refer to it, thus finding a foundation for his famous "penis envy" theory. We are well aware now of the fact that an appalling lack of knowledge underlies those opinions. The myth of there being two female orgasms, clitoral (immature) and vaginal (mature), advocated by classical psychoanalysis, masked the primacy of phallocentrism, revealed by the fact that the female organ became complete only through contact with the male one. This myth was deconstructed by Anne Koedt in her cult essay of Second-Wave feminism.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary sexology knows many types of female orgasm, which can be mutually complementary, but there is no hierarchical order to them. Nonetheless, vagina remains to be fully examined, an organ that has considerably broadened its appeal among researchers.<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary feminist anthropology is going through an absolutely affirmative wave of interest in the vagina. Catherine Blackledge's book quoted above is one example, but there is also *Vagina: A New Biography*<sup>9</sup> by Naomi Wolf, an iconic writer of Third-Wave feminism. The essayist regards vagina as an autonomous subject deserving a biography of its own. Beginning with biological facts, Wolf reconstructs the theses formulated by contemporary neurobiology, suggesting a specific relation between vagina and brain.

It is predominantly through her vagina that patriarchy ideologies the function and role of women. With new discoveries being made all the time, modern neurobiology departs from traditional stereotypes in most surprising directions. Naomi Wolf, for example, writes about "vaginal pulses"<sup>10</sup>, which are subconsciously felt by women connected by a sense of satisfaction. The myth that there is rivalry for penis

6 I use the term "vaginismus" intentionally to describe a new vaginal trend in art aimed to change the negative associations triggered by female sexuality. In medicine, vaginismus is the name of a disease. Giving a new valorising meaning to the word "vaginismus" here is deliberate.

7 Anne Koedt, *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm* (Somerville, MA: New England Free Press, 1970).

8 It was only in 2008 (!!!) that a team of French researchers led by gynaecologist Odile Buisson captured the first ever three-dimensional ultrasound image of clitoris (see: "Waginatyzm," 2012, accessed 24.06.2023, [http://iwonademko.pl/rzezba/waginatyzm/waginatyzm\\_tekst.html](http://iwonademko.pl/rzezba/waginatyzm/waginatyzm_tekst.html)).

9 Naomi Wolf, *Vagina. A New Biography* (London: Virago, 2012).

10 Ibid., 359–64.

among them is twice denied here – not only are females free from a penis complex, they also experience multiplied affirmation generated by their femininity.

It is within this context that I would like to return to the “obsession with vagina” of Iwona Demko, an artist calling herself a “vaginist.” The first part of her doctoral dissertation explored how female sexuality was conceptualised within the process of reconstructing an alleged passage from matriarchy to patriarchy. The second part was constituted by a monumental camp installation titled *Chapel of the Vagina*.

Iwona Demko uses the term “vaginal fanaticism,” and derives from it a neologism – “vaginatism.” Her preoccupation with the vagina is largely based on the ancient rite known as *anasyrma*,<sup>11</sup> or lifting the skirt. Herodotus was the first to describe it in his account of Egyptian religious beliefs linked to the worship of a female deity.<sup>12</sup> Plutarch mentioned a similar occurrence when the Persians fought the Medes – it is said to have embarrassed the Persian warriors fleeing to the city to hide from the enemy. The women who went out to meet them lifted their skirts and said: “Surely you cannot, in your flight, slink in here whence you came forth,”<sup>13</sup> thus forcing them to carry on fighting and push the Medes away.

The womb is sometimes interpreted as the source of providence in Sheela-na-Gig figures found across England and Ireland. These depictions of females displaying their genitalia in a blessing-like gesture tended to occur on the ceilings of houses and churches, and are believed to have been put there to bring good luck to their inhabitants.

Many cultures and civilisations across the world feature similar rituals and beliefs. *Anlu*, a practice known in Africa since the 19th century, involves women exposing their vaginas to defuse social tensions caused by male violence. One of the latest occurrences of *anlu* (or *anasyrma*) was observed in Cameroon in the 1960s. Women stepped between local ethnic groups engaged in combat and bared their vulvas. “They stripped naked and put their vaginas to men’s noses to demonstrate that they were unworthy of the bodies that had borne them.”<sup>14</sup> Such was their success that it initiated the process of overthrowing the French colonial government in the region. A spectacular instance of *anasyrma* was provided by Leymah Gbowee, a Liberian peace activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate who rallied women to stage mass protests during the Second Liberian Civil War (1999–2003). Their intense activity led to the democratic election of the first female president in Africa – Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 2008.

Wartime rape confirms the fact that female body is a battlefield, yet historical episodes of skirt lifting and displays of female nudity point at another aspect of vagina’s political nature. It is powerful enough to influence politics and change the course of history. But its political character is much more complex – emancipating female sexuality from men’s oppression is one of the prerequisites to a long-term civilisational transformation ahead of us.

This is the very context that should be applied when discussing Iwona Demko’s endeavour. The employment of naivety and kitsch in her works nurturing the vaginal obsession may represent a longing for another possible order. This longing can be interpreted as nothing but a “crazy” postulate. Or it can be viewed as an alternative to social prestige systems valorising in an equally simple and naïve way the male

11 The term is derived from the Greek verb ἀνάσσυμαι, meaning more or less “skirt up;” the ritual is also called *anasyrma*, which is a transliteration of the related noun ἀνάσσυμα. Both forms *ana-suromai* and *anasyrma* are used interchangeably.

12 Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. George Rawlinson (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Media, 2013), 121.

13 Plutarch, “Bravery of Woman,” [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Moralia/Bravery\\_of\\_Women\\*/A.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Moralia/Bravery_of_Women*/A.html), accessed 24.06.2023.

14 Diane Ducret, *Zakazane ciało. Historia męskiej obsesji*, trans. Anna Maria Nowak (Kraków: Znak, 2016), 251.

body and the male values, which we know and subconsciously reproduce. Thanks to Lacan, who picked up where Freud left off, and first of all thanks to post-Lacanian psychoanalysis, we know that male morphology pervades the entire symbolic system of our culture, which is there to safeguard patriarchal dynamics. Phallogocentrism stipulates how meanings are codified to consolidate male dominance and cultural primacy. Freud's notion that "anatomy is destiny" is today a multifaceted statement the deconstruction of which overhauls scientific reflection, philosophical premises as well as the foundations of our thinking.

The strategy adopted by Demko relies on repetition and redundancy – her 'vagina' gets multiplied, recurring in numerous artistic gestures that include baking cookies, sewing vaginal pillows, or building the *Chapel of the Vagina* consistent with the poetics of surplus. The demand for a cult of vagina to be established is outright secular with no affiliation to any religious quest. It is more like putting an alternative system of ideas to a test, though without pointing to any final conclusions. Firmly embedded in Poles' collective imagination, a religious cult with its rituals and devotional items provides the best provocative backdrop to such search. *The Chapel of the Vagina*, a vaginal prie-dieu, a set of vaginal anti-devotional items form a symbolic string that represents a challenge to patriarchal dominance.

The aesthetics of kitsch embracing pink and gold, soft fabrics and sequins, brings the iconography of the drag queen to mind. In the usual lukewarm reaction to emancipatory camp aesthetics adopted by members of sexual minority movements, Judith Butler saw a record of heterosexual melancholy, a longing for another, less oppressive or normative sexual order. Demko takes the glamour side of drag queens and uses it in her creative work which is wholly dedicated to women. Her pieces focusing on menstruation (*28 Days*), getting naked (*Anasyrma*), trafficking in women and girls, and sexual violence, tend to revolve around the vagina, which the artist puts at the centre, yet apart from the accusation these works bring against culture, they also address the issue of female suffering inflicted by patriarchal culture.

Demko's art is interventionist in that it symbolically interferes with traditional systems of truth and associations. For this reason, her creative work shouldn't be considered separately from her theoretical research which she has defined in her doctoral dissertation *Vaginatism*. An introduction to the *Chapel of the Vagina*, its form is meaningful as well – it is a gold-cover book with an opening running right through the middle of it, revealing on each page a relief of the labia. The symptomatic "hole", a reference to the traditional perception of femininity as lacking and defective, is filled here. This filling represents a desire for new phantasms and new women-friendly senses in sexual, existential and political terms.

### The Uncomfortable Laugh of the Medusa

The work *408,223 Raisings of the Skirt, or My Dream of the Black Protest*, where the number signifies the number of women residing in Kraków on the day of Black Protest – October 3rd, 2016 – is an artistic and theoretical application of "vaginatism."<sup>15</sup> By restaging the act described by Herodotus, Demko seems to be fomenting a female rebellion. This is not only about taking to the streets. This is also, if not first and foremost, about a symbolic revolution based on processed ideas related to the sexual order. The multiplied artist performs the role of every woman, speaking on their behalf.<sup>16</sup> The

15 Iwona Demko. "Różowa owca wydziału." Interviewed by Grażyna Smalej. *Nowa Orgia Mysli* (17.12.2017) <http://nowaorgiamysli.pl/index.php/2017/12/17/rozowa-owca-wydzialu/>.

16 It should be stressed that the artist's gesture is individual and private and as such should not be extrapolated to every feminist art dealing with the body.

act of *anasyrma* retains its power to change the course of things. 408,223 *Raisings of the Skirt* is an expression of the desire to make the aspirations of women political.

One more mythological character needs to be recalled here – Baubo. Featuring among the figurines used in the rite of the Eleusinian Mysteries, this goddess made Demeter – sick at heart about losing her daughter – laugh. Baubo has a mild face where her belly should be, her labia are like a chin between the legs – a face and a vagina at once. She is also an important reference in Hélène Cixous's essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*.<sup>17</sup> The philosopher begins by discussing Freudian ideas connected with female sexuality expressed by the metaphor of “dark continent” used in his essay *Femininity*. The phrase embraces a projection of unharnessed wilderness, a mystification of an unexplored mystery, while intending to honour the promise of control and dominance at the same time. Cixous refuses to obey these conceptions. The Medusa symbolises the fear of castration, but the author insists that her liberating laugh acts against oppressive clichés.

Male projection of the threat of castration justifies violence against women. Cixous's demand is simple and its outcomes should be immediate – we can change the signs that evaluate this order. We can see and laugh at the absurd fear instead of castration. The Medusa's severed head is castrated femininity. The laugh of the Medusa is synonymous here with Baubo's laugh, or the benefits from an extrasystemic intervention, a functioning relic of female power incapacitated by patriarchal control.

As I see it, the laugh of the Medusa echoes in Demko's work as well. Black mandorlas, phantoms of the real vagina, can be referencing Baubo – what remains of Baubo's mythological nudity has assumed the form of a mask. The mask has the advantage of not exposing female nudity in an ambiguous way; after all, every representation of it must confront male projection with concurrent sexual control.<sup>18</sup> Here, the mask also exposes oppression and violence.

We may conclude, considering the response elicited by the Poznań exhibition and the fact that Demko's piece has become a meme in artistic circles (“Oh, she's that artist obsessed by vaginas...”), by asking the following question: can the vagina be used to goad? All negative portrayals related to the female sex present in symbolic resources, including *vagina dentata* and the likes of it, are totally controlled by male projection and fail to provide a positive boost to the power of women. *The Laugh of the Medusa* introduces a new quality here – by deconstructing the methods of establishing symbolic violence it opens the way for women's empowerment. The message of Demko's work is amplified as it dovetails with contemporary feminist activism. The rite of *anasyrma* is an accepted part of it: suffice it to mention the feminist demonstrations in Milan on the occasion of Women's Day in 2015<sup>19</sup> or the actions performed by British activist Nicola Hunter, the founder of the movement Raising the Skirt.<sup>20</sup> Considering the ironic literalism of Demko's piece, using the “laugh of the Medusa” to goad seems perfectly possible.

17 Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875-93.

18 It is in this sense that Karolina Plinta feels uncertain in her opinion on Iwona Demko's work whether she sees the artist's vagina or not.

19 Blakk-mamba, “Ana Suromai,” *DeviantArt*, 9.03.2017, <https://www.deviantart.com/blakk-mamba/art/Ana-Suromai-668048009>.

20 Hunter says: “‘Raising the Skirt’ has influenced my practice for many years (www.nicolacanavan.com); by questioning notions of beauty and the status of women socially and culturally across many religions, and how this affects how the female body is translated across mass media; I feel it would be an important step back to go forward, to reclaiming the cunt as a powerful tool in assertion.” “M.A.M.A. – Mothers ARE Making Art – New Installation(s),” updated 1.07.2015, accessed 24.06.2023, <https://mommuseum.org/2015/07/01/raising-the-skirt-with-m-a-m-a/>. See also *Disgusting feminists started project ‘Raise’ skirt, wanting women to act in a public place*, (YouTube: NBC Today).

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# VLASTA A ŠÁRKA OR THE GIRLS WAR AND GENDER<sup>1</sup>

Reflections on gender arise where gender does not want to be viewed only as given by nature, but above all as a social construction. Therefore, gender is often associated with so-called “women’s art”, the promotion of civil rights through the work of women, although they are not only concerned with emancipation and equality in society, but with women’s art in the best value sense of the word. Where the word “sex” once referred only to a biological difference, today the concept of “gender” also refers to its extensive social and societal influences.

In the examples of the works of female visual artists, gender can be examined in the development of modern and contemporary art typologically, in a certain historical and chronological sequence. When, at the end of the 19th century, the so-called “women’s art” sought autonomy, it was primarily based on education for housework and the art of decorating, and was inspired by embroidery, ornamental painting, flower arranging, textile creation and clothing fashion. On the contrary, where in the interwar period the poetic imagination proved to be more important in creation than craft and technique, women rose to surrealist visions, and with courage as well as in social life. Later, after the Second World War, when the medium of photography became increasingly important, women connected their social ambitions with breaking down prejudices and social clichés through this genre, primarily by ironizing femininity fetishes and searching for a unique female identity through new means. In addition to surprising successes in sculpture, which they approached very organically and naturally, they also began to devote themselves to collages, assemblages, and other experimental techniques, and more and more to photography. Starting with their participation in the happenings, they also found themselves at the barricades in the 1960s, and in the fight for equal rights, they went through a process of sexual differentiation and manipulation of their own bodies. From these experiences, in the

1 The text was a curator’s introduction to the exhibition: *VLASTA a ŠÁRKA aneb Dívčí válka a Gender* in Galerie kritiků / Gallery of Art Critics, Palace Adria in Prague and Gallery Konzum, in Brandýs nad Orlicí on the occasion of 5th Jan Amos Comenius’ Art festival “Mámení / Delusion”, 2006.



1970s, they came to free love, the knowledge of sexual ambivalence, and they carefully examined their ties to men and to their own sex. From reflections on transvestites, myths, and the sale of sex, they matured into figuring out the essential meaning of family and searching for their feminine identity. In the case of female artists who began to create in performances and with new media, we will discover a unique potential for communication. Thus, the female specificity today significantly affects not only the work of women themselves, but also the work of men in general, and shapes the creative and interactive principles of contemporary art.

The exhibition *Vlasta and Šárka (or The Girls' War and Gender)* takes place in the Critics' Gallery of the Adria Palace in Prague, with a continuation in Konzum gallery in Brandýs nad Orlicí, as part of the 5th *Mámení* autumn festival. Thematically, it follows the previous year's show dedicated to men and fathers. Although it might seem like a name of a militant feminist movement, it means nothing more than a sample of today's work of more than a dozen young Czech female artists, whose works captivate the art-loving public without distinction.

In Czech history, the "Girls' War" is a legendary story about the rebellion of women against men. In ancient times, after the death of their princess Libuše, women wanted to continue to assert the rule of women in the country. Under the leadership of the warlike girl Vlasta, they fortified themselves at Děvín Castle before being defeated by conquering men. The story of Ctirad and Šárka is also part of this legend. The young man Ctirad, enchanted by the charm of the girl Šárka from the group of warriors, was trapped by the leader Vlasta in the form of a girl, chained to a tree in the middle of a dark forest. Ctirad was ambushed and killed by her party when he tried to free her from "captivity." However, all men were warmly welcomed at the exhibition *Vlasta and Šárka* and they were not in any danger of women.



**OTHERNESS AND  
THE POLITICS OF  
IDENTITIES**

# NATIONAL HEROISM TROUBLES<sup>1</sup>

The black-and-white portrait photograph of Milan Rastislav Štefánik (1880 – 1919) in his French general's uniform is the best-known portrait of this Slovak politician, French general, diplomat, astronomer and fighter pilot, who together with Thomas Garrigue Masaryk and Edvard Beneš, was a key figure in the genesis of Czechoslovakia in 1918. The photograph has had numerous reproductions in Slovak books and magazines and school textbooks, and in recent decades also in digital media. By incessant appropriation, this portrait has assumed something of a folk character, and it may have various complementary meanings. In an artwork by Martin Piaček (1972), *Milan Rastislav Štefánik as Anna Daučíková* (2007),<sup>2</sup> which is based on this photograph, the face that gazes on viewers is not, however, that of the historical figure, but that of the contemporary Slovak artist and academic Anna Daučíková (1950).

To understand the work, it is essential to recognise both these persons, and assistance may be had from the work's title, *Milan Rastislav Štefánik as Anna Daučíková*. The artist has not only put gender roles in question, but he has also disrupted historical causality. A man from the past is here “dressing up” as a present-day woman. The “cross-dressing” actually consists in an exchange of face rather than an exchange of clothes. Piaček has shuffled the cards and played a game of identity associated with national history, gender and social status. In the following text I am focusing especially on the gender and feminist interpretation of this artistic gesture.

For some time now, Piaček's work has been focused on artistic examination of national history and historical figures, and especially on questions of heroism. A large proportion of his history-related works is critically orientated, as Zuzana Majlingová observes in a catalogue of his art: “As an author of artworks he does

1 This text was originally published in Lenka Kukurová, “Trampoty s národným hrdinstvom,” *Profil*, no. 4 (2020). It was written for the regular feature “Fem positive” in *Profil* journal of contemporary visual art, in which feminist and queer art in various registers by female and male Slovak artists has been presented since 2016. The works presented in this feature prove that, while feminism is not the mainstream of art in Slovakia, the feminist discourse, usually received with perplexity by the majority of the population, has notably changed the thinking of many artists and, via their work, also of a large number of the public.

2 Digital colour print, 30 x 21 cm. In the collection of the Nitra Gallery in Nitra.

not trust the officially presented history, its linear causality and publicly presented mythologisation.”<sup>3</sup> The individual figure of Milan Rastislav Štefánik is, however, conceived as a symbol of a positive hero in Piaček’s art. References to Štefánik appear on a number of occasions in his works, for example as a “soapstone” souvenir, a photo of a ruined airman’s uniform, or the artist dressing as a bust of this hero.

Gender interpretations have been making their way gradually into Piaček’s works without any set purpose of the artist, as he himself says: “I do not proceed programmatically from gender standpoints in my work. For me, the national-historical aspects of the themes I’m addressing are more important. Nevertheless, I do appreciate an interpretation where my pieces are placed in gender context.”<sup>4</sup> On the genesis of the work considered here, the artist comments: “The portrait of Anna/Anča Daučíková, an important Slovak video artist and academic, was produced at a time when I was seeking a person who could be a present-day Slovak pendant to Štefánik. I feel a great respect for Anna/Anča Daučíková; at the time when the work was produced, she was pro-rector for international relations at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava, so she was constantly flying. And it’s also well-known that, like Štefánik, she too has stomach problems. But despite this physical handicap, she’s a very powerful personality. I was glad when she agreed to this portrait.”<sup>5</sup> Hence the work originally came into being as personal homage, but at the same time it is homage to a feminist and queer artist, so that gender reading is present in the work automatically.

On a feminist level, the artwork *Milan Rastislav Štefánik as Anna Daučíková* has a number of layers of interpretation. On the one hand, Piaček is commenting on history and exploring the masculinised form of heroism – this level of interpretation was prevalent in the exhibition *Fem(inist) fatale*, where the work in question became the central motif.<sup>6</sup> The figure of the artist in the work forms a kind of pendant to the historical male figure and draws attention thereby to the absence of heroines: “History is focused on the present, and so the question of the absence of female hero-figures is formulated as still topical(...) At the same time, this work may be understood as an impulse towards writing the herstory of Slovak history and art history”.<sup>7</sup>

Use of the historical photograph in Piaček’s work also opens up considerations about the status of women in Štefánik’s time and his relations with them. In Slovak history and popular narratives, Štefánik is usually portrayed as a romantic and lover of women, with a great many female admirers. With that being said, it was women friends of his who enabled him to make acquaintance with political circles in France; one may speculate that without their influence behind the scenes, he would never have gained admission to that society. However, we need to recall one fact that the Štefánik mythology does not very often address: his rejection of voting rights for women. The historian Michal Kšíňan seeks to re-evaluate the idea of Štefánik as a

3 Zuzana Majlingová, *Martin Piaček, 2006 – 2012* (Banská Bystrica: Stredoslovenská galéria, 2012), Exh. cat., 3.

4 Martin Piaček, “Niekoľko komentárov k okolnostiam vzniku mojich prác,” in *Rodové aspekty súčasného umeleckého diskurzu*, ed. Jana Geržová (Bratislava: VŠVU, Slovart, 2012), 86. This publication appeared as an essay collection from the interdisciplinary symposium in the Nitra Gallery. Piaček has since said that the path to a feminist interpretation of his works began precisely with this symposium.

5 Ibid., 90.

6 Lenka Krištofová, Jana Cvíková and I chose this work as the main visual for the exhibition. A reproduction of the work was used on invitations, posters, and other promotional materials. In the exhibition the work was installed high on the wall, in the manner of a state portrait. *Fem(inist) fatale*, Kunsthalle Lab, Bratislava, 2015, <https://kunsthallebratislava.sk/event/feminist-fatale>. A thematic issue of the journal *Glosolália*, 2015, no. 4, was devoted to a detailed analysis of the exhibition and the art of Martin Piaček.

7 Michaela Bosáková, “Fem(inist) Fatale: čerstvý vánok v miestnosti plnej predsudkov,” *Glosolália*, no. 4 (2015): 55.

progressive democrat: “Štefánik’s model of governance was not identical with today’s form of democracy; however, one certainly cannot designate it as dictatorship. It was a kind of restricted form of democracy.”<sup>8</sup> Dressing Štefánik himself as a woman is an artistic gesture which transforms women from objects to subjects, acknowledging their social status and importance.<sup>9</sup> The artist here somewhat idealises the figure of Štefánik and divests him of conservatism. In the historical context, this subversive step would undoubtedly have been regarded as blasphemy.

On a further level of interpretation, the work alludes to the theme of identity and touches upon queer issues. Here we can look at identity not only from the gender standpoint but also in wider contexts of otherness. Milan Rastislav Štefánik came from a Lutheran family in predominantly Catholic Slovakia. He spent a large part of his life as a representative of a small unknown nation abroad. Although one of his ancestors probably belonged to the appearance, he did not measure up to the contemporary notion of “manliness”. Also problematic is the mythologising of his national identity, where on the one hand Štefánik is thought of as a Slovak patriot,<sup>10</sup> and on the other hand as an advocate of Czechoslovakia. At first glance, these ideas are mutually exclusive. However, the historian Peter Macho says: “In reality, he was not personally conflicted between his Slovak and Czechoslovak identities”.<sup>11</sup> In 1912 he additionally acquired French citizenship. Štefánik therefore in many respects fell into the category of otherness.

Anna Daučíková answers to the category of otherness openly. It is somewhat problematic to designate her as a Slovak artist and teacher: born in Czechoslovakia, she worked for a long time in Russia, subsequently in Bratislava, and afterwards at AVU in Prague. Queer theorist Paul B. Preciado summarised the artist’s biography as follows:

One could say that Anna/Anča Daučíková is the first Czech/Slovak feminist female artist – except that Daučíková’s work problematises the terms of this seemingly simple enunciation. Who can claim to be the first? Who can act in a nation’s name? What does it mean to be feminist? Can a subject to whom female gender has been assigned at birth resist becoming female? [...] she moved to Moscow in the 1980s—when everybody was trying to travel in the opposite direction. She didn’t do it for politics, she did it for love: she was following a woman to a country where, according to its government, homosexuality did not exist.

(...) On the strength of her glasswork and painting, Daučíková became a member of the Soviet Artists’ Union. Nevertheless, like homosexuality, her conceptual and video/photography work was invisible in Moscow; otherwise, she could have become the first lesbian Soviet artist—or even the first transgender Soviet video artist. (...) She returned to Bratislava in 1991—when everybody was traveling in the opposite direction—where she co-founded the queer feminist journal *Aspekt*.<sup>12</sup>

8 Michal Kšíňan, “Jedinec v spoločnosti. Úvaha o biografickom prístupe na príklade M. R. Štefánika,” *Forum Historiae* 4, no. 1 (2010), <http://forumhistoriae.sk/sites/default/files/ksi-nan.pdf>. Štefánik says in a cited passage: “I am not for universal suffrage or for universal female suffrage. A person has to learn everything. For everything there are specialists. Needleworkers, doctors, notaries. When the doctor speaks by the sick man’s bed, the notary must keep quiet. And yet everyone gets mixed up in politics.”

9 Voting rights were accorded to women as early as 1919, thanks to Masaryk and Beneš, but for the first woman president of Slovakia we had to wait a further hundred years.

10 This idea survives to the present time. In 2019 Milan Rastislav Štefánik won an RTVS television poll entitled The Greatest Slovak.

11 Peter Macho, “Milan Rastislav Štefánik – bohatier a mučeník,” in *Mýty naše slovenské*, ed. Eduard Krekovič, Elena Mannová, and Eva Krekovičová (Bratislava: SAV, 2005), 167.

12 Paul B. Preciado, “Anna Daučíková,” <https://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/13567/anna-daucikova>. About the origin of *Aspekt* also: Jana Cviková and Jana Juráňová, *Feminiz-*



Apart from these biographical othernesses, Daučíková also thematises otherness in her art, frequently casting doubt upon the unambiguousness of gender categories, and criticising other norms besides.

This is precisely what may lead us to a queer interpretation of Martin Piaček's work in the line of third- and fourth-wave feminism, which problematise the very concepts of "man" and "woman" (though in all probability the artist did not directly intend this). Piaček is not dressing a man as a woman, rather he is dressing a man as a woman with a queer identity, who is at the same time an artist. Štefánik himself in the historical photograph is also "performing" male heroism using masculine attributes: he is wearing a French general's uniform with a tall hat, which masks his national and class origins and low stature. In the original photograph he has war medals on his chest. As against that, Daučíková's face does not carry any of the characteristics that we might designate as "feminine", and thus the substitution of binary gender categories disappears. Daučíková in uniform could easily "pass" as a general. The principle of travesty, employed here by Piaček, may be interpreted also as a questioning of the idea of some sort of correct gender identity, which is furthermore linked with sex and is necessarily heterosexual.

Gender is here exchangeable; it is an unstable identity and a construct of cultural conventions. Judith Butler declares: "The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self."<sup>13</sup> With a touch of humour (which Piaček's work too possesses), together with Butler and Daučíková and perhaps also together with Štefánik and Piaček, one may state: "Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically incredible."<sup>14</sup>

Slovak history often stylized Štefánik as a manly hero, which leads one to think about the essence of heroism. The long enduring assumption that heroism is linked with some sort of "male" characteristic is cast in doubt in Piaček's work. The "dressing" of Štefánik as Anna Daučíková, however, is not just an allusion to female heroines: it is a challenge to include all types of otherness in a heroic story. Perhaps one day we will reach a situation where national history will take the form not only of history and herstory but also of queer story (in the sense of all minorities) and will not be written only by the victors.

*mus pre začiatovníčky* (Bratislava: Aspekt, 2009).

13 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York-London: Routledge, 1999), 179.

14 *Ibid.*, 180.

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# RESETTING – THE PROCESS OF CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION ON THE EXAMPLE OF A YOUNG PAINTING<sup>1</sup>

In today's era, which is characterized by the process of the ever-advancing formalization of living space as a result of economic values and media consumption, the natural human sense of orientation in time is dulled. The role and meaning of chronological reasoning (history) is being questioned, continuous and contextual concepts are disappearing, and with them, human perception is radically changing. It is difficult to stand against the given deepening condition from the position of the individual, because there is no solid point that would justify the resistance. On the contrary, alibisms of all kinds are being sought so that panic does not arise from the fact that we are increasingly being artificially untied from the de facto unchanging natural world and involved in constructed social contexts. These then model our ideas about development, stability, peace and background, which can only be achieved by increasing one's own price on the labour market or political influence. On the one hand, this paranoid situation radically compresses the space for human imagery, which is increasingly subject to the process of schematization and usually ends up in kitsch, sentiment, or in a conceptual or activist axiom. On the other hand, there is room for excessive activities that are a substitute for real action, whose influence on the course of things is felt to be futile. A space is created for the "sinister", which accompanies, develops and "cultivates" lifeless kitsch, as well as formalisms of all kinds, hand in hand. Here it is enough to recall, for example, the widespread popularity of the fallen genres of sci-fi, fantasy, thriller, etc. It is an ideal environment for the artificial creation of consumer idols and for the manipulation of collective consciousness. Visuality is becoming a means of today's communication, but at the same time it is deliberately reshaping its principles. As long as the media was socially established, it was a lively and in many ways inspiring process. However, this is replaced by mechanical cycling. The new forms only technically more perfectly mirror the old ones. The content becomes a "specialized schema", which is accepted either passively or unconsciously by the recipient.

Since both friend and enemy lose form, targeted revolutions (interventions) cannot be carried out, not even artistic ones, because they cannot be targeted. With

<sup>1</sup> The text was originally published in Petr Vaňous, "Resetting. Proces kulturní transformace na příkladu mladé zobrazující malby," *Revue art*, no. 1 (2008): 44-49. Rewritten in May 2021.

the loss of direction and linearity, the notion of novelty also disappears. Nothing is really new; everything repeats itself in some way. This is a mere “appearance of novelty.” The constantly encroaching schematism in art requires different ways of resistance. Lately, in our (compared to the West) environment, for example, the seeding of anonymous activities associated with interventions in public space is manifested. The revolt seemingly fulfilled in the relationship of the anonymous artist versus the anonymous crowd is, as a result, realized only symbolically. Here, too, there is a tendency towards formalism with the alibi argument that it is a visual manifestation of subcultural communities reserving the right of encrypted communication (the language of axioms), which remains partial and closed for that very reason. Although many interested in live art are impatiently waiting for these tendencies, it seems that this “set space” is once again just another suitable adept for reinterpretation and recycling within the accelerating art establishment.

Another form of defence against formalism (again) returns to resignation of the material output of art, as manifested in activism, performance or concept art. Another possibility in visual culture is the choice of targeted hybrid forms, which at the moment of creation of the work, precede the process of formalization by being already mutated or (trans)infected in advance. The conceptual element of “mutation” and “virus” then entitles the author or his translator to essentially any defence of his work, since “proliferation” (propagation of the same) is a form of legitimate activity permissible in a situation where nothing new is created and there is nothing to effectively demarcate against. The method of formal “exuberance” in the work corresponds to “rhetoric” in artistic theory. In this context, media permeation and the blurring of boundaries between expressive disciplines also play an important role. There is a phase of smearing over experienced forms and contents and their dissolution in temporal media and spatial installations. Scepticism, but at the same time euphoria from breaking taboos, breeds irony, black humour, but also exhibitionism, narcissism, self-serving aesthetics and poetics, or a fondness for absurdity. Art begins the path of paraphysical activities.

In the middle of this happening is the medium displaying the paintings, which reacts to the given situation. The image becomes a sensitive X-ray, a sensitive surface that captures external and internal impulses and synthesizes them into an expressive language. The whole process takes place in the range between the disappearance of objectivity (dematerialization, abstraction) and its return in other forms (stylization, interpretation, representation). In fact, this polarity is only a conceptual construct, allowing the process to be grasped and at least roughly named. For illustration, let's call it Resetting. The term translates as zeroing, but also adjusting, erasing or resetting. Resetting value then means “return value” (to space, to figure, to content, to multiplicity, etc.). It was as if there was a period of calm, favouring the process of return and repetition, which, however, is different every time, because it is carried out in new time-space contexts and with varying degrees of authorial distance or involvement. Resetting results from the free act of creation, from the diversity set against the closing formalism and schematism, in the setting against the totality of the mass media, where only those who “will be appropriated” and then “alienated” can go, both from themselves, from their surroundings and finally from their own effort. The point is to generate diversity without political and power ambitions. It is a revival process that frees human consciousness and feeling from lethargy and passivity, and should lead to self-awareness and humility, but also to self-confidence and human dignity. It is essential to find, or rather to constantly find the “bolts” corresponding

to the new form and function of the message, and to maintain direct communication between living art and its recipient on all possible levels.

The decisive method of “resetting” in visual painting can be found in the variety of paths to objectivity. These “paths” have their starting point in working with period attributes and are determined by the polarity between the feeling of objectivity disappearing and its return (reification) in a different, selective and displaced form. Emphasis is placed on the return of the human dimension to visual art, which, among other things, lends elements of imperfection such as error, gesture, emotion, but also scale. Although the individual has, figuratively speaking, “oversaturated consciousness” and “unfocused vision”, because they are hit by an “information whirlwind” from various media, at the same time they physically exist, which requires daily contact with objects, images of objects, changing spaces, time and its course etc. It also moves daily, which means orientation in space and perception of spatial relationships in their statics and dynamics. At the same time, he feels pain, for example, because his existence is physically conditioned. Related to this is the ambivalent perception of space as a vulnerable arena, a place where certain threats may lurk. The time is coming when it is appropriate to focus on individual human elements as the first keys to the memory blocks of today. These are the interweaving of visual language in a process of permanent oscillation between the desire for perfection and the defence against closing formalism and the fatigue of losing the goal. If today, given the speed of change, it is not possible to determine the true direction of art and determine the exact degree of market manipulation of visual culture, the movement of the artist's own thinking can be identified and a partial summary of a certain period of time can be presented as part of a collective presentation. In this sense, painting functions as a centuries-tested medium against which changes and shifts in thinking, perception and collective sensibility can be discerned.

The core of “resetting” in Czech art can be conceptually traced to artists born in the 1970s (with overlaps into the previous and the following decade). Their painterly relationship to objectivity is built on the basis of a double experience. The role is played by the attributes of today's consumerism, but the normalization environment of the totalitarian Czechoslovakia of the 1970s, which this large generation has stored in their subconscious, remains complementary here. At the time when an individual learns to write and read, he also learns the most. This is also why elements of resentment or nostalgia appear in their work, which, however, lacks a political character. It is much more about the individual contexts of the authors, where everyone specifies their own spatio-temporal coordinates in a different way while maintaining the centrifugal and centripetal movements between “escape from” and “return to” their own subject.

A cross-section of this generational painting can bring, among other things, a view of the repetition of certain motifs that are supporting and key to the Central European region and thus indirectly reveal the identity of our environment. The choice of the painting medium for the location of the “resetting” is natural, as it has a long-standing local tradition, and that is also why it is possible to record both the repetition of a certain objectivity and the changes that occur in society and in the opinion of its young generation, paradoxically, through an active process of constant repetition, but not passive recycling.

# INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

# THE PROVINCE CEASES TO EXIST, THE REGION REMAINS. AN ART THEORY CONFERENCE IN ZSENNYE<sup>1</sup>

The idea of the international art theory conference in Zsennye came up at the February 1991 meeting of the *Kállai Ernő Circle*. A month later, at the next meeting of the Circle, I presented my sub-topic proposals along with the suggested title outlining the themes: regionalism and universality; the autonomy and social position of art; the issue of the art market in Eastern Europe; the region's artistic cooperation.

The organisation was started according to these premises, and the Circle received the support of the Association of Artists, the Arts Fund and the Ministry of Culture to implement the matter. The conference took place on October 28-30, 1991, in Zsennye, in the artists' house of the Arts Fund, with the participation of fifteen Hungarian artists and two foreign art historians and artists. The final document adopted after the debate, following the last presentation, states that the conference proved to be a suitable forum for discussing the problems of contemporary artistic life, and therefore the participants consider it necessary to hold it annually.

Most of the presentations at the conference were related to the issue of regionalism. The topic was made even more relevant by the political changes in the region and the war in Yugoslavia that was unfolding in the meantime. In the case of two speakers (Magda Cârneci, Bálint Chikán) a specific, optimistic interpretation of the conditions after the collapse of the Soviet-centred socialist political world-system arose. According to this somewhat romantic way of thinking, the countries (and artists) of this region have a historic chance for the third way, an alignment with the "learned" capitalist development that allows our countries to have a corrected trajectory. However, the current events slowly turn the optimistic idea into a completely utopian one.

1 The text was originally published in Bálint Chikán, "A provincia megszűnik, a régió marad. Művészetelméleti konferencia Zsennyén," *Új Művészet*, no. 3 (1992): 83-84. Translated by Kata Balázs.



In the debate, Péter György took the position that if we want to co-exist with the concept of regional culture as a value-adding notion, we must be able to develop a critical theory of regionalism. In the absence of this, we would either be overwhelmed by the so-called Western civilization, in which an industrial-scale concept of art lives, or we would enclose ourselves in national traditions, and then nostalgic regionalism would sink our region to the level of pre-modern nationalism in no time.

Magda Cârneci also spoke in connection with this circle of thought about the fact that a group of artists formed in Romania during the Ceausescu era, which, embracing the tradition of Orthodox-religious culture, was a countercultural factor to the official art. After the turn, some members of the group moved from the progressive to the retrograde side without changing their approach. Zoltán Sebők said that a similar situation and the formation of an artist's career could also be observed in Serbia, i.e. that the transformation of a split-spirited, counter-cultural art into an affirmative cultural phenomenon took place precisely because the artist 'unbrokenly' stood for his principles. The environment changed, while his art has not. The relationship between tradition and progression in art is not static.

The relationship between the progressivity and counter-cultural nature of art was a recurring issue of the meeting. Katalin Keserü also spoke about this and said that the avant-garde in Hungary always had a political content. Only in the 1980s, when the West discovered this region based on its own criteria and began to 'sniff out' this region, did our artists begin to adapt to a universal norm that resulted in renouncing many things. This brought about, among other things, that today the relationship between the avant-garde (if we can talk about such a thing at all) and affirmative culture is not clear.

From the point of view of the art market, László Beke formulated the problem of the region's art as follows: if we think in terms of global art, then the only value measuring factor in our time is the art business. We don't have a system for this, so the West could "grind in" what is in this part of Europe. But if we accept the challenge and build the classic system of art trade here too, it will become clear how terribly great the lack of capital is, and we will only be able to decently manage one or two of our artists. If we do not accept the Western system, then it will be natural that the West will only deal with our people according to its needs and interests.

The Western preconceptions are well known. Almost everyone reflected negatively, for example, on the statement of Joachimides, the director of the Metropolis exhibition in Berlin in 1991, that Eastern Europe is uninteresting because it is only a "magazine culture" that feeds on second-hand material. Starting from this idea, Péter Sinkovits analysed, among other things, whether the medium, an art magazine or a book can be a source of inspiration. Naturally it can, but behind Joachimides' idea lies a deep contempt for the Eastern European region. In order to eliminate this condition, we need to increase our self-knowledge and self-esteem.

Gábor Pataki pointedly raised the question: is it even justified to consider the former political region as a unified region from an artistic point of view as well? One of the essential lines of his thought carried the same message as that of Sinkovits earlier. Namely, in order to be able to answer the questions regarding the content of regionalism, one must have a thorough self-knowledge of local art.

All these opinions strongly supported the timely nature of the program that the writer of these lines announced as the introductory speaker of the conference. That is, there is a great need to start a new art magazine as an organ of the art of

this region, which makes the artistic events, results and outcomes, and values of our countries accessible in English, both within and outside the region.

At the conference, Nadja Medneva made an attempt to give the participants a comprehensive picture of Bulgarian avant-garde art (in the columns of this paper, her thoughts will be published). József Sárkány, art historian of the Janus Pannonius Museum in Pécs, talked about issues that can be integrated into everyday museum activities and contribute to the clarification of problems, such as putting collecting and documentation on a new basis, and building cultural channels (exhibition-exchange opportunities) within the region. In addition, there was a lecture on Hungarian ceramics (Sándor Lánicz), the activities of one or two domestic artists (Lajos Lóska) and the painful fate of even non-avant-garde artists in our country in the last forty years (István Lelkes).

# THE TYRANNOSAURUS IS AN UNSUITABLE MEANS OF TRANSPORT. NOTES ON KUNSTHALLE'S (MŰCSARNOK) EXHIBITION<sup>1</sup>

The *Image'90* (*Kép'90*) exhibition is the latest joint venture of the Hungarian art world. It was organised by the Association of Hungarian Fine and Applied Artists for its members. According to the announcement, the jury free exhibition contained only a limitation on quantity (i.e. one work/person). The result: more than 300 works of art in Műcsarnok / Kunsthalle Budapest's five halls, with significant attendance, between November 16 and December 9, 1990.

What is the purpose, you may ask, of organising a joint, jury-free exhibition in 1990? The meaning of this act is that the artist-guild declares itself unified for the outside world, considers the definition of "high art" claimed by offices and organisations to be valid. Therefore, the present organisation(s) must be conserved. Who knows better than the current College of Fine Arts, the present Art Fund or the Association of Artists? No, they are not good, but there is nothing better.

By abandoning the existing frameworks, the possibilities of advocacy and protection of interests would be reduced, and the already catastrophic existential conditions would further deteriorate. Therefore, people join a camp to side with. Disagreements can be resolved within that, over a glass of swill. Cohesion can be proven by artificial "events". Like the *Image'90*.

In this spirit, the painting department of the Association undertook to update the joint parade organised with poor outcomes every year at the Műcsarnok / Kunsthalle, by announcing a current theme. The title of the current exhibition still preserves this intention, but the method of organisation no longer does. All that remains is the declaration that the prehistoric creature, the Association of Artists, which came together in one way or another through the various waves of cultural policy, is still a high-quality professional organisation whose members can take responsibility for each other. And the promise (not for the first time) stands as well

1 The text was originally published in András Bán, "A tyrannosaurus alkalmatlan tömegközlekedési eszköz. Jegyzetek a Műcsarnok kiállításához," *Új Művészet*, no. 3 (1991): 17-18. Translated by Kata Balázs.

that this institution will also become an effective body of advocacy, after reforming itself, sometime in the future.

Ladies and gentlemen! What are you talking about? This is not the time for declarations. It is about how we get through – with dignity and good taste – all this here and now, and the next few years! An ‘all in’ national exhibition? Maybe it would be worth organising a painters’ blockade, but not in the halls of the Kunsthalle.

On the other hand, four illustrations are included with this article. Works of four well-known artists from the national exhibition called *Image’90*. Obviously, none of them created their paintings with the intention of saving the world. They aimed to create neat, saleable goods. The question is whether these works meet this need. When looking through an art gallery, I can find decorative works made of noble materials (the picture of János Erdős almost comes off the wall). I can demand that my literacy be pleasantly tickled (Ágnes Garabuczy’s piece is such an uninspired paraphrase of Magritte’s that it is beyond comparison). I can expect classical values or avant-garde madness to be applied in a room-sized way (Iván Szkok gives his all, but still doesn’t understand why Bernáth Aurél or Yves Klein were good painters). Or let that work be a collection of witty aphorisms filled with one-sentence sagacities (rather than clichés muttered under the nose like in the case of Sándor Vecsési).

I should be asking the artists to excuse me that I have singled them out. No, do not do that! Their works’ serious internal contradictions as well as questionable quality can also be proven with a longer analysis. Let the reader forgive me that I do not list more examples of my thesis: decent works of craftsmanship are also needed – but only in their place.

# THERE IS NO DEMOCRACY IN ART. CONVERSATION WITH LÁSZLÓ BEKE<sup>1</sup>

Certain groups of contemporary artists are openly attacking the exhibition policy of the Műcsarnok / Kunsthalle Budapest, and the director-general of the institution, László Beke, believes that they are knocking on open doors. The large-scale exhibition planned for the millennium will worthily present a cross-section of Hungarian art. Conflicts always arise between artists and officialdom, which is why Beke says that good politics can be judged by its “tolerance” of the independence of art.

**László Szále:** Just a few weeks ago, the prestigious European Academy of Sciences and Arts welcomed you to its ranks in Salzburg, but here in Hungary your activity is in the crossfire of controversy. You seem to have undivided recognition abroad, while at home your appreciation is very much divided.

**László Beke:** I am proud to be a member of the Academy, first of all, because I was awarded this membership along with very important personalities, and because it shows that the Kunsthalle is recognised by the international public as a prestigious exhibition venue. I have become a member of a very respectable body – together with the sculptor György Jovánovics – the founding members of which include such personalities as Cardinal König, and the patrons of which include Árpád Göncz and Václav Havel, but the best thing about it is that once or twice a year I have the opportunity to meet people of great stature. As for the criticisms and accusations in Hungary: on the one hand, they are understandable from those who cannot exhibit for the time being, the walls of the Műcsarnok / Kunsthalle are not made of rubber, so it would be impossible to exhibit everyone anyway. On the other hand, we don’t want to exhibit everyone, because our principles

<sup>1</sup> The text was originally published in László Szále, “A művészetben nincs demokrácia. Beszélgetés Beke Lászlóval,” *Magyar Hírlap*, 10.04.1999. Translated by Dániel Sipos.

are not made of rubber either. The accusation that we exclude certain people and trends was first raised not during my term, but twenty years ago. They were also dissatisfied with Katalin Néray and Katalin Keserü – in fact, the same or almost the same people.

**LS: Why twenty years ago?**

LB: That was when the Kunsthalle became an “independent space of intellectual work.” At the initiative of the National Hungarian Fine Arts Society, a parliamentary decree ordered a hundred years ago that it be built, but its further fate was not outlined in legal terms. The building was granted to the society, and for fifty years they treated it as their own. They organised various exhibitions for themselves and also collected paintings. It was a truly previous-century organisation; what they represented was called academic art. The Second World War was followed by decades of centralisation, when the system of national exhibitions was established, the socialist system of patronage, in which many people got used to a status quo in which the state supported the artists and occasionally organised a large scale group exhibition for them. This came to an end about twenty years ago. From the beginning, one of the unresolved issues has been that the then still monolithic Hungarian Association of Fine and Applied Artists kept demanding from the Műcsarnok / Kunsthalle – still state-controlled, but already run by a single responsible person – that they were “entitled” to a national exhibition. This debate is still ongoing and very heated.

LS: Is it not the case that an art organisation is trying to establish its own image and intellectual independence, and are artists trying to survive after the loss of state patronage? “Art is what a particular social situation declares to be art.” I’m quoting this sentence from an interview with you. And if it is true that art is what others consider to be art, then it is vital for a Hungarian artist that the most important hall of Hungarian art validate their art.

LB: Without doubt, the more something is mentioned, the broader the circle that accepts it as art and the more it should be considered art in a sociological sense. But that does not affect the question of quality, which is even more important in art. Rippl-Rónai was a great master; it is only now, when he has become so trendy, that it is really becoming clear how many pieces of poor quality he made. Of course, those works still belong in the sphere of art. I understand that every artist wants to exhibit, but the better work should always have an advantage over the inferior one. It is not who can exhibit and who can’t that determines whether an exhibition is up-to-date, but the approach and the method. Good exhibitions are arranged all over the world by developing concepts based on real values and trends and selecting works to suit them; it is not from a pool of works offered by various interest groups that the best are selected in a “bring your own material” spirit.



LS: But if the exhibition organiser has their own particular set of values and selects artists according to a certain concept, many people know for sure that they will never be selected. It must not feel good to live and work without ever getting into the nation's most prestigious exhibition hall. That would either require me to change, and that might not be me anymore, or the exhibition system. Why not make an exception? Enforce the Kunsthalle's declared exhibition policy, plus organise a national showcase.

LB: You are forcing open doors. There will be such an exhibition. That's not the problem, the problem is who should say what to exhibit in the Kunsthalle. But this debate topic has not been on the agenda since 1996. A ministerial decree was issued that year after a year and a half of consultation, which clearly regulates the operation of the Kunsthalle. It stipulates that the main task of the Kunsthalle is to present Hungarian contemporary visual arts and associated arts, to present international art in Hungary and to present Hungarians abroad. The Kunsthalle fulfils this task as an "independent space of intellectual work". Under the responsible leadership of the director-general, who is to be appointed by way of competition. From here onward, there is nothing to discuss. If some people have other ideas, new legislation should be enacted to provide for a different way of running the Kunsthalle. Same song, different verse. In the name of the homogeneous artistic community of the time, some people take a stand against the one-person institution of the time. The individuals are also almost the same. Some 15 years ago, the president of the Hungarian Association of Fine and Applied Artists called on one of my predecessors, Katalin Néray, to organise exhibitions for the association because "the Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle had become a fashion hall." That was not true then, as it is not true now. Each year we present a major branch of art, because that is the only way to show the public the most important artistic endeavours in a prestigious, worthy and enlightening manner. Of course, we could tell: a) everyone, b) those who can verify their art with some degree, to bring in their works, from which we will select enough for an exhibition and wallpaper the Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle with the pictures. This experiment would also be tremendously enlightening...

LS: Doesn't the absence of a jury declare that this is no more than a fair, nothing to do with art?

LB: This is a risk. But that is the price of a rigidly understood democracy, and that is why I say, for which I get berated for by many people, that there is no democracy in art.

LS: If there is no democracy in art, then there is no art in a democratically organised exhibition. I believe that's why many people are not enthusiastic about exhibitions without juries, because what they want is not everyone to be able to exhibit, but for them to be able to exhibit, they want prestige and juries, not democracy.

LB: There is truth in that. But despite the demands of many people – including my superiors – that I should in fact exhibit everyone, I know that the profession cannot benefit from mixing the mediocre, the poor, the good, the half-way decent and the excellent. I am here because I know Hungarian art, and my job is to present its results to the public in exhibitions based on concepts. That is what I was appointed to this post to do. I could be denounced if I failed to recognise some brilliant work. A collective exhibition of the entire scene may be interesting from an art sociological point of view, but it can't be good. Miklós Erdély comes to mind, whose oeuvre we have recently shown to the public in a major exhibition. He and his friends painted a “democratic painting” at the Kossuth Club: they sat down in front of the audience with Ákos Birkás and Lóránt Hegyi and said: go ahead and vote, we'll paint what the majority wants. Clouds? Yes, a cloud. A poplar tree? Here you go. In the end, the democratic painting depicted a poplar tree, a tank and a cloud – as the majority had requested. It was a game, but one with very serious meaning. And isn't that what has been going on for a hundred years with every public sculpture?

LS: Let's face it, conflicts are inevitable. But aren't these conflicts too grave? Shouldn't a national institution shift from self-righteousness towards consensus?

LB: These are the constantly emerging problems of everyday work. One must always be careful not to go overboard. I struggle with these problems every day. The principles are clear, there is nothing to argue with, but in practice we make concessions. We did the large-scale Hungarian Salon exhibition in 1997, which our critics now dismiss as nothing, as if it had never happened. Now we had a proposal to begin with: we are offering to organise a huge exhibition for the millennium. I proposed that it should be without a jury. They said it would be better with a jury. That was the prevailing position in the end. Let's have it, although I'm not happy about it, because it will create new problems.

LS: As a critic, you seem open and permissive, but as director-general, you are very steadfast. How do you reconcile these two distinct roles? The art critic is nuanced, reflective and analytical, while the director-general is forced to say only “yes” and “no.” We exhibit this, we don't exhibit that.

LB: I don't consider myself infallible, but I can say that a lot of practice makes mistakes rare. One belongs to several places at once: the domain of art critics, the domain of art historians, while also being a civil servant and a bureaucrat. This is a typically post-modern situation: the different spheres intertwine and overlap. Whether this is good or bad is an ideological question. I would like to find my way in the world, but as an academic, I notice that everything tends towards complexity. Aesthetics seeps into mass communication, the world of finance into the intimate sphere, in art, evil is mixed with good, artists with non-artists. Art life

is organic. Young people come, they learn from the old masters and try to create something new. Sometimes they succeed, sometimes they don't. The older ones sometimes burn out and then rise from their ashes again. The critics criticise, sometimes they are wrong and mistake the fake for the real thing, etc. It is a dynamic, ever-changing world, full of fake and bluff, which, if you only recognise it in retrospect, leaves you angry with yourself.

LS: I get the feeling that you're on the side of the new as opposed to the traditional. As if you were saying: I can instantly see that the traditional is a cliché, only the new has a potential for being original, but of course also for being a bluff.

LB: Without doubt, the experimental, exploratory mentality of the avant-garde is something I find incredibly attractive. A weary, boring, resigned attitude is not good for art. I am one of those who are curiously in search of the unknown, because it is more exciting to discover the new than to tread in one place, but now I will add: the more I see the same thing, the more novelty it will reveal to me. This is an idea even more radical than the avant-garde: to discover the new in the old. A work of art is real because it is inexhaustible, because there is always something new to be found in it. So, I don't think that the new is always good and the traditional is bad. A true artist spends his entire life searching for the new, the good new, while carrying on everything from the tradition that is current and contemporary. On the other hand, the newest tendency, postmodernism, paradoxically renounces the avant-garde, the movement that has always sought the new. For me, being up-to-date simply means giving the best answer to life's challenges.

LS: Yet your critics accuse you of favouring only the newcomers, the pioneers.

LB: It's hard to argue with them. One painter attacked me: he said I was postmodern, which he said was nothing more than throwing up on the canvas. First of all, I don't consider myself postmodern. Secondly, perhaps this not very tasteful definition applies to the avant-garde, but certainly not to postmodernism. If someone can't tell right from left – how can I argue with them?

LS: A few weeks ago, you received a letter from the ministry asking you to postpone the press conference scheduled for that day. Since then, a rescheduled one has already taken place. In what ways did the two press conferences differ?

LB: [They differed] in nothing. I said the same thing word by word as I would have said then.

LS: What was behind the dramatic 'blocking'?

LB: A ridiculous series of misunderstandings. First of all, I am convinced that as director-general I can hold a press conference on the affairs of the Kunsthalle whenever I feel the need. I felt

the need because I wanted to announce our plans and because around that time a person calling himself an artist appeared in front of our gate, burning his paintings in protest against our exhibition policy. I felt that the press wanted to know my opinion. I invited the ministry out of politeness and because I also wanted to inform them. They believed that they'd have to present some kind of official position, and they made me cancel because – so to say – they hadn't had time to prepare.

**LS:** You recently received another letter from the ministry, telling you not to plan exhibitions in the Ernst Museum and the Dorottya Gallery for the year 2000, because these venues will no longer be under the purview of the Kunsthalle.

**LB:** I was not happy with the letter; I could only reply that I would ignore it. Consequently, I will continue to make plans for the year 2000, because I find the proposals so unfounded that I hope they will change their minds. There are no professional grounds for this move. What other grounds could there be?

**LS:** In any case, this decision shows that your relationship with the ministry is not without tension.

**LB:** The conflict between the profession and politics is natural. The Kunsthalle does not think primarily in terms of cultural policy, but wants to satisfy the professional aspects of art while, of course, catering to the public. This is inherently a conflict, which would be resolved if the state recognised that art is the best investment that can always be used for representation. Even if it has an oppositionist hue. Then even more so, in fact. Good politics can be recognised by its "tolerance" of the independence of art.

# IS A NATIONAL EXHIBITION NECESSARY?<sup>1</sup>

The system of annual national exhibitions has come under criticism in recent years. Today, most of the critics doubt its *raison d'être* and consider this form of presentation “outdated”, “compromise”, or even “unfruitful” or “lacking a concept”. On the other hand, there are also a few – mostly artists – who fight for its organization year after year as they demand the annual exhibition and the opportunity to find out about what their colleagues are doing what, where they are in their work. At least based on attendance, it seems that a significant part of the audience also likes this exhibition format promising a wider overview. Opinions are therefore divided. However, in the absence of reliable surveys and exact polls, it would be irresponsible to make any assumptions about the proportions of opinions. With that being said, it is questionable whether a problem can be solved by a majority decision. Thus, we can only examine the situation on a speculative basis.

The institution of the national exhibition, the “salon” has a long history. In Hungary, it is already 150 years old, and in France it is even older, with its origins dating back to the 18th century. The salon – as the modern age institution of civic publicity – created the possibility of regular meetings between visual arts and the audience. The exhibition served not merely as a presentation of the works to the public, but also as the centre of a series of important events. A kind of ceremonial system was almost formed around it, the parts of which presuppose and logically follow each other: the judging, the arrangement, the awarding of prizes, the opening, the appearance of purchases and art reviews. It was possible to enter the exhibition after judging on the basis of some kind of competition, comparison, contest, so in accordance with the ideals of “free competition”. The acceptance and exhibition of the work was considered a success in itself, but the issues of who was placed in which room and who was “hanged where” also meant rank and professional authority. The opening, i.e. the vernissage, was a social event of outstanding importance, a celebration at which, in addition to artists, critics, and journalists, the leading personalities of political and business life, as well

1 The text was originally published in Árpád Timár, “Szükség van-e országos tárlatra?,” *Új Művészet*, no. 3 (1991): 19-22. Translated by Kata Balázs.

as the excellences of intellectual life, appeared. Forming an opinion based on what was seen, discussing the sensations among themselves - it was part of the lifestyle of the noble society, which considered itself to be educated, as more than one novel from the last 19th century attests to this. The press also saw the exhibition as an “event”: it reported on the preparations, the opening, the attendees, the awardees, the purchases, and of course the scandals, failures, and downfalls. Official evaluation, ranking, and the awarding of prizes were an integral part of the exhibition. In addition to fame and glory, the donated gold medal, diploma or scholarship for a study trip abroad represented a significant financial success. (In the last - 19th, the translator - century, the fees were still such a high amount that they even ensured the carefree working conditions of an artist for several years). Naturally, all this happened in front of the public and the press.

The exhibition and its success were then the basis for further promotion: it was then that purchases were made by the ruler, the cultural government or art and museum patronage associations. It was mostly then decided who would be commissioned to decorate public buildings, who would be more likely to participate in memorial tenders, and who would become a fashionable portrait painter. Art criticism was also an integral part of the system. Comparing the hundreds of works displayed side by side at the exhibition, comparing them with the salons of previous years, highlighting, characterizing, praising the defining individuals or trends, justifying the awards or casting doubt on their eligibility, created the genre of exhibition criticism in the press. Every reputable, worthwhile paper aimed to have its own critic, to gain authority for the newspaper with the originality, independence, and professionalism of the opinion appearing in its columns, so that it could influence both public opinion and official decisions with its viewpoint. Public opinion and a longer or shorter period of public agreement on artistic, aesthetic, and taste issues were formed from the discussion and confrontation of the opinions of mutually independent newspapers.

This system - thus described briefly and schematically - of course, looks too beautiful, well-functioning, and problem-free. In fact, the possibility of conflict is inherent in the concept of the salon from the very beginning. The jury was always in the hands of the established ones, the “elders”; the artists in academic positions dictated the standards, they determined the standard of judgement, they decided who would be admitted from among the young, the unknown. It was always difficult for the new and the unusual to enter the exhibitions; from the mid-19th century it became almost possible. The press - or at least the greater part of it - did not always recognize the true values, the rigidity and decline of the system became a barrier to artistic development and renewal. The contrasts and tensions led to a radical split in the countries with the most developed and richest artistic life: there were various “secessions”, the institutions (associations, reviews, exhibition spaces), salons of the “rejected”, the “independent”, the young. In essence, modern art was created in the process of rebellion against the academy and the official salon.

As much as the traditional national exhibitions lost their prestige, the importance of smaller group exhibitions, joint debuts of those with the same principles and the same outlook, became increasingly important. In the 20th century, the structure of exhibitions became completely transformed. The art market, the network of galleries dealing with both sales and exhibitions, took on an increasing role, and more and more individual exhibitions presenting new works or entire bodies of works were opened. More recent is the exhibition form that is organized around a pre-developed program or “concept”, as well as the “curator’s” exhibition, where the emphasis is not on the artifacts, but on the arrangement, the setting, where the actual work of art is



the exhibition composed as a whole. These concepts, naturally, are already very far from the original “bazaar” character of salons.

In Hungary, all this happened late and in an odd way. From the 1840s, the organization of national exhibitions became regular and institutionalized – there was a time when several exhibitions were organized a year, entitled *Spring, Autumn, Winter Exhibition*. However, the established institutional system, the Society of Fine Arts and the Műcsarnok / Kunsthalle could not be shaken by the efforts to seek renewal for a very long time. In essence, the members of the Nagybánya School grew into the existing institutions, the separation, the withdrawal from the Kunsthalle was actually only realized with The Eight's exhibitions, and only from the 1920s, during the regular activities of the KUT (Képzőművészek Új Társasága / New Association of Fine Artists), did the separation become final.

Of course, the new endeavours and truly valuable works mostly appeared in individual and group exhibitions in Hungary, but, at the same time, there were also attempts to give greater importance to the national exhibition covering the entire art community again and again. The “national” exhibitions organized in the 1930s were intended to have an ideological role – albeit with a different approach – as the national exhibitions of the 1950s, where it was necessary to demonstrate conceptual and stylistic unity. Part of the absurdity of the 1950s is that even then, the artists whose works were not accepted at the national exhibition experienced the rejection as a serious offence, as a sign of exclusion from the artistic society, as a doubt about their artistic existence, even though they could have been proud of the fact that they could not and did not want to meet the criteria of admission. Of course, the reaction of the artists is somewhat understandable, since there was no forum, no other opportunity to introduce themselves – for a few years in the early 1950s there was neither art trade nor individual exhibitions – so the rejection and exclusion had very serious existential consequences. The extraordinary importance of the 1957 *Spring Exhibition* can be understood from this situation. This exhibition was both a demonstration and a celebration: a protest against the previous cultural policy, a demonstration in favour of pluralism regarding views and style, and at the same time a celebration of the return of neglected and outcast artists.

So, the national exhibition is not an empty form, not a mere framework, it does not only mean that the works of “all” Hungarian artists can be seen at the same time in the largest exhibition institution. The long and varied history of this exhibition form cannot be disregarded: many emotions and many meanings have been attached to it, so various arguments can be found both for and against it. However, hopefully, its future will not be decided by ideological arguments. Namely, there are also practical arguments in favor of it. The national exhibition – in addition to its historically changing meanings – also has such remarkable and constant qualities and attributes openness and completeness (both of which are understood relatively, of course) – that are suitable for meeting real needs. There was – and might be in the future, too – a function of such an exhibition that is open, where everyone – young people, beginners, the unknown or forgotten – can submit their works with the hope of reaching the public. To present their artistic production to the audience and colleagues, to stand out with their latest works, to achieve success – this is a natural and legitimate demand of every artist. Of course, this exhibition form's openness is not complete. If the exhibition is jury-free, then some formal condition (graduation, association membership) determines the range of exhibitors. If anyone can submit their work, the jury decides who can exhibit. Of course, we have to accept that there is no perfect solution without contradictions. If the exhibition is open to submissions and has no

jury, then very weak work will inevitably be included alongside good work. Moreover, it is not certain that a good artist chooses well from one's own works. If the jury consists of only a few members, then subjectivity cannot be eliminated, since everyone chooses according to their own taste and values. If, on the other hand, the jury is larger, the accepted material shifts towards mediocrity as the majority decision filters out the scandalously weak pieces as well as the unusually new, the brave, the astonishing ones.

We also have to consider it a realistic demand that both artists and a large part of the public would like to receive some sort of overview, some sort of cross-sectional view of the artistic production as a whole from time to time. Of course, completeness can never be achieved either – a favourite topic of critics in recent decades has been to wonder who is not present at the national exhibition – neither volunteering nor some kind of administrative compulsion can guarantee this. We could also try to approach completeness by having a respected critic, curator or art historian collect the material and organize an exhibition called “the best artworks of the year.” That way, we would certainly get a more thoughtful, better organized exhibition involving more really good works, but then the openness would cease.

We must accept the phenomenon of the national exhibition as it is. Chaotic and unorganized of uneven quality, not as conceptional as a documenta, and not as high quality as an *oeuvre* exhibition of a first-class artist or a well-chosen collection of a contemporary art museum. It is different. It has a different origin and a different function. But until we find a better one, maybe this form has its own *raison d'être* as well.

# PROPOSAL TO REORGANIZE THE ASSOCIATION<sup>1</sup>

No matter how controversial the current situation of Hungarian society is, it cannot be denied that a completely new structure is beginning to emerge on the ruins of the old system, which has become non-functioning. This fact must be taken into account in any kind of situation analysis, despite the fact that in many areas there is an attempt to save the previous system or to apply it to the new situation. It is a fact that the process of transformation has slowed down due to objective and subjective reasons, nevertheless the paradigm shift is striking everywhere.

All this is also reflected in the crisis of the institutional systems of society. Most of the institutions that ensured the operation of the former system were clearly linked to the state-party structure, their task was to serve it. It goes without saying that these institutions are in crisis. At the same time, in the past, there were also many institutions whose activities were distorted by political considerations, but they were essential components of this social mechanism. The current situation is characterized by the fact that not only the institutions created out of ideological considerations have fallen into crisis, but also the latter. Their crisis is not the result of political considerations, but the difficulties of structural change, the pitfalls of the transition to market economy, the uncertainties of the new financing system, the contradictions of the transition to “civil society” explain their inability to function. In the current situation of the country, it experiences the crisis that the old institutional system is already largely nonfunctional, but at the same time the new structure has not yet been formed.

Most of the problems are caused by the fact that the political forces governing the country do not have a clear vision of the future, and therefore cannot have neither a strategy nor any tactics. In these scientifically unconsidered “visions of the future”, the idealized American-Western European democracy, the re-dreaming of Hungary seeking for modernization in the twenties and thirties, the illusion of social market economy is included in the same time, and all of this is nuanced by a certain nostalgia for 1956. This vision is not suitable to think about the future of various institutions, and in general, to think about what can be expected from social institutions and what role can be assigned to them. After all – to approach our problem area – the scope of tasks of art institutions

1 The text was originally published in Lajos Németh, “Javaslat a Szövetség átszervezésére,” *Új Művészet*, no. 3 (1992): 69-72. Translated by Kata Balázs.

in a Western European-American type of “cultural field” is quite different than in a situation that re-dreams the cultural activities of churches. However, many ideological aspects may lie in this issue, practice calls for the need to take a stand. All kinds of social institutions are legitimized by the role and function they play in the social structure. It is only in this context that we can examine the situation and the future of our fine arts and applied arts institutions. After I gave my opinion at the Symposium Association’s general assembly in Siklós a few years ago, I will therefore only concentrate on the most important issues and focus on the analysis on the status of the Association.

A scientific analysis has not yet been completed of the institutional system in which Hungarian fine arts of the 20th century operated – but there are a few studies providing some clues.

Between the two world wars, the somewhat still feudal structure, state management and the self-organizing activities of civil society mixed with each other. An example of a system that still preserved the structure of the 19th century was the Society of Fine Arts, which was not only an art but also a social organization, with patrons and a financial base – therefore it could also award prizes. Despite everything, it ceased to be a true factor in the art world at that time, and played no role in the formation of values. The real art life took place within the framework of the “civil society”. Professional rank was given by the institutions created in the course of the self-organizing activities of the artists – such as the Szinyei Association and KÚT (New Association of Artists). Unfortunately, according to our current knowledge, we do not know who provided the financial hinterland for these artistic institutions. It is clear that it was not the art trade, because it did not really develop in our country. There were some attempts at the turn of the century, but they died out shortly thereafter. Between the two world wars, a few institutions that paid attention to both art trade and professional aspects emerged – Tamás Gallery, Fränkel Salon – but they could not become the organizers of the art life on their own. Therefore, the best artists of the time depended on the taste of private collectors – praise to these private collectors, since they collected Egry, Bernáth, Szőnyi and Derkovits and thus enabled the creative activity of some excellent artists. The intellectual elite and the “economic elite” therefore met in a lucky way then not like nowadays.

In addition, patronage provided by the state continued. Not just the method inherited from the feudal system, but according to the needs of the new propaganda art of the totalitarian state. This became clear during the Gömbös era, when the task of “national education” fell on the artists. The reviving church art, the artistic service of various representative events of the state – exemplified by the activity of the “Roman School” – put to the fore a specific function of art, all of this naturally affecting the way of patronage as well as the formation of the structures of artistic life.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, Hungarian artistic life was characterized by a rather eclectic formula. The post-feudal structure (see the Society of Fine Arts) is still alive, the autonomous sphere has been organized, and at the same time more and more attempts have been made to create the art institutional system typical of totalitarian dictatorships.

After 1945, it seemed that the Western European system prevailed, after the view that art was an autonomous sphere and as such regulated itself and created its own institutional system became accepted. The exhibition policy of the “European School”, the “Gallery of the Four Points of the Compass” and the Municipal Gallery exemplified this renewal, the profession’s attempt at self-organization. The institution of the Art Council, in principle independent from the Ministry of Culture, showed that fruitful cooperation could also develop in the relationship between the state and art. The organizational changes were perspectival, but at the same time, the art trade that could regulate the financial situation of art could not develop – merely due to the shortness of time.

The unfolding development was brought to a halt by the “year of the turning point” – when, based on ideological considerations, the self-organization of artistic life was prevented by administrative means. Monumental propaganda once again became the primary task of art, and this required a specific organizational system. The establishment of the ideological unity of the profession and bringing together the artists in professional organizations also became primary tasks. The Association was created to achieve a specific goal – socialist realism – and advocated a common path instead of individual paths. Consequently, its real task was to support the ideas of the current cultural policy. At the same time, the Arts Fund was created with the aim to become the financial base of the Association undertaking the specific task.

However, it became more and more obvious that the cultural policy came to grief with the creation of art associations. All kinds of institutions, following the logic of things, strive for autonomy sooner or later. No matter how much the operation of the associations was regulated, a certain democracy prevailed more and more, thus the organizations became disruptors of the monolithic system. In this regard, the Writers’ Association played a leading role, as visual and industrial artists depended much more on state patronage than writers. But the Association of Fine and Applied Artists also became more and more suspicious from the point of view of official management, because it clearly got under the influence of the “reform communists.”

As in the life of the country, 1956 was also a caesura in fine and applied arts. An open dictatorship prevailed for a while, but in the years of ‘consolidation’ they essentially wanted to return to the system typical around 1953. However, the Association was “suspicious” in a political sense – this is proven by the manipulations and wranglings that developed during the leadership elections and the fact that the Office reserved for itself the right to the appointment of the executive secretary who played the role of the political commissioner.

The fact that the cultural policy management did not trust the Association is proven by the fact that the Arts Fund, which originally played a service role, increasingly performed art policy tasks. Also, the Art Lectorate was established, which, in addition to certain administrative functions, acted as a state censorship office.

Despite all kinds of administrative intervention, it must be stated as a fact that in these years the state assumed responsibility for “art”, i.e. supported it from the budget. Even though it wanted art that would “serve” its goals, when it realized that the majority of artists did not undertake this task, it did not withdraw the subsidy from the institutions even then.

In this situation, the Association of Fine and Applied Artists found itself in an increasingly confusing situation. Demanding an autonomous government system for art, it confronted the official leadership. At the same time, it was unable to establish contact with the “underground” groups that simultaneously attacked the existing system from political and artistic points of view. Thus, the Association increasingly found itself in the no-man’s land between serving official art policy and real artistic life. It secured its theoretical rank by protecting values to the best of its ability, but he was less and less able to pull together the real processes of artistic life.

At the same time, the artists of the so-called “underground” received more and more help from the West – they became internationally known and received scholarships. Those who got banned or at least fell into the “tolerated” category in the infamous “three t” system of domestic cultural policy became favourites in the West. As a result, the value system of the domestic artistic life became more and more confused. The Association was not prepared to take a stand on this issue, let alone because the majority of its members did not even understand the new endeavours, or opposed them.



In the last decade, it was more “rewarding” to be an “oppositionist” than a semi-official, official artist – because the European artistic life was open to the former, while the latter depended only on domestic patronage –, of course, not to mention artists like István Kiss, over favoured for political reasons, or Imre Varga, the proclaimed official genius.

### **Problems of the present situation**

Before the last general assembly of the Association, and with the new statutes accepted there, it tried to renew itself – it made the system of affiliates possible, allowing more space for self-motivation. However, it could not change the fundamental contradiction that the social organization essentially supports itself from the budget provided by the state. Although the state leadership does not want and does not exert any kind of pressure on the social bodies, they make their decisions democratically, so in principle the self-regulatory system works. The state therefore accepted the autonomy of artistic life. At the same time, due to the general crisis – regardless of any political opinion – the maintenance of state financial support has become questionable.

The situation gets complicated further by the fact that previously monolithic organizations start to disintegrate more and more, and new grassroots cultural organizations are also being created. Then, based on the principle of equality, also ask for a share of the money intended for culture and art. This is well exemplified by the splitting of the Writers’ Association into three parts (“Old’ and ‘New Association”, Chamber). There is a risk that the amount intended for support will be distributed in such a way that – if the cultural management ties the share from the budget to an application – necessarily renders the operation of many institutions – such as the Association of Fine and Applied Artists – impossible.

At the same time, one has to face the fact that the Association is less and less capable to “legitimize” itself. It ceased to be the hub of the Hungarian fine and applied arts society because of several reasons:

- a) the majority of the so-called leading artists no longer consider activity in the Association important. They entered the bloodstream of international art life – and art trade – they do not need the hinterland provided by the Association, all the more so, because they have not felt the organization is theirs for quite a long time.
- b) the new associations that are forming now are not created within the framework of the Association, and they do not need to maintain contact. They expect the financial basis for their existence from the Studio, city and district councils and sponsors. Behind this lies the sad fact that they simply would not be able to “communicate” with the majority of the members of the Association. The new movements already think and act in an intermedial environment, they are occupied with such new media which are generally foreign to the members of the Association.
- c) art institutions – museums, exhibition institutions, such as the Műcsarnok / Kunsthalle, the Budapest Gallery, etc. – pursue an independent art policy, the Association is only an obstacle for them. Most of them – especially the Kunsthalle – have built such an international network of contacts, gained such an international reputation and had such an infrastructure that the Association cannot compete with. If the Association itself was forced to take on certain exhibition organization tasks, it resulted in unsolvable situations, as shown by the sculpture biennial in Pančevo (Pancsova) and the Slovak-Hungarian reciprocal exhibition in Komarno. The ordeal of the Árkád/Arcade Gallery also proves the Association’s inability to function.



The problem of the Association is of course also related to the question of the artists' financial situation and their exhibition opportunities. The current situation is characterized by the fact that state patronage is increasingly withdrawn, and civil society is not yet able – or often unwilling – to foster affairs related to art. The Western European model appears only as wishful thinking. This model is characterized by state funding (e.g. museums, larger exhibition institutions) and local government support (e.g. maintenance of exhibition halls, support for environmental aesthetic commissions). A solution similar to our old 2000s system works in several places. Financial institutions use fine and applied arts to build their image, and the system of foundations and the tax policy supporting cultural activities are operating.

In the current Hungarian situation, even the outlines of this system are not yet unfolding – the foundation system is chaotic, the sponsorship is random and humiliating. Another difficulty is compensation (e.g. returning the ownership of facilities that currently function as museums, exhibition spaces, creative houses to the church, e.g. the case of Siklós). Expecting help from society is therefore currently an illusion.

### Organizational problems

The possibility of setting up a chamber as a solution to organizational issues is raised as an example of several related arts. The purpose of the chambers is usually twofold: to protect professional values and quality, i.e. to exclude bunglers from the field of the profession, on the other hand to protect interests, and to a certain extent to revive the guild system. This is conceivable e.g. in the case of architects, when the degree, certain design work, etc. can be an objective criterion for chamber membership. In the present situation of the fine and applied arts, the expansion of neo avantgarde, underground and so forth, no objective criteria are available to the profession – the diploma alone is not a sufficient standard. Additionally, as a side note, the chamber has a very bad history in the field of fine arts – see the intentions to create chambers during the years leading up to fascism, when they wanted to use the chamber as a tool for ideological and racial discrimination.

It is also problematic to maintain the Association in its current situation and form – if the need for communication between artists has ceased, only bureaucratic rules hold the organization together. The democratic decision-making dictated by the constitution makes the Association inoperable anyway (i.e. Arcade Gallery).

The only solution is to transform the Association into an association of affiliates. In this case, the Association is a voluntary platform of institutions (associations, partnerships) operating as independent legal entities, which coordinates the activities of the member associations. Accordingly, a small organizing/managerial office will be created, which will represent the affiliated associations *vis-à-vis* the state, partner institutions, and foreign partners, and will handle applications, scholarship requests, etc.

In addition, in order to help the financial situation of the profession, the possibility of reinstating the system similar to the two-thousandth and establishing a scholarship system that supports the individual creative work of artists in many countries should be examined.

It is also necessary to review the extent to which the artists' club life could be restored again. The most suitable for this would be the headquarters of the Association of Architects, which could be transformed into a house of architectural, plastic and visual arts. The organizing offices could operate in this building. The building also has an exhibition space, it also has rooms suitable for club life, it could also operate a restaurant, and with good management, it could be a self-sustaining business.

# THE NUDE RENEWED. SEXTS AND TEXTS<sup>1</sup> ON THE “BARE BABES”<sup>2</sup>

(SHORTENED)

## “Do women have to be naked to get into the SNG?”<sup>3</sup>

In 2010, in the Slovak National Gallery (SNG) in Bratislava, an exhibition was held entitled *Nudes. Uncensored Works by Modern Masters*. Authorship was shared by Petra Hanáková, curator of SNG's Collection of Other Media; Jana Juráňová and Jana Cviková, commentators, from the feminist publishing and educational organisation ASPEKT; and finally Eva Filová, freelance artist and designer of the exhibition and catalogue. An ad hoc grouping of authors, that is to say, worked on the project initiated by the curator – a quartet, incorporating a duo of long-serving authors and editors of the feminist journal Aspekt and the ASPEKT publishing house.

By virtue of its founding document, the Slovak National Gallery is regarded as the “highest-ranking” state exhibition, collection and scholarly research institution in the field of art in Slovakia and ASPEKT is regarded as an organisation representing especially the third (non-governmental) sector. But the *Nudes* exhibition showed that in collaborative efforts across civil society, the state is not inevitably only “first”, meaning (let us say) central, elevated, tame, sated, passive, conservative, and simultaneously exclusive and excluding. In other words, the one that governs (is powerful); while the “NGOs” are not only “third”, hence complementary, marginal, humiliated, untamed, always hungry, active, innovating, while at the same time (impotently) consigned to

1 The neologism in French: *sexe*, English *sext*, Slovak and Czech: *sext*, is taken from *Le Rire de la Méduse (Medusa's Laughter)*, by the French writer, dramatist and philosopher Hélène Cixous, which appeared in 1975. By combining the words *sexe* and *texte*, Cixous created the word *sexe*, thereby designating a sexually, biologically differentiated inscription of one's own corporality into language, speech and communication, itemising the marks of expanded syntax for *l'écriture féminine* (women's writing), which female and male authors write in white ink (a kind of symbolic flow of “mother's milk”) on the white pages of world writing. Women's writing erases the differences between communication in speech and text, between arrangement and chaos, sense and nonsense. In the phallo-logo-centric system it is not possible to define it; this does not mean, however, that it doesn't exist and that one cannot imagine it. Joyce's texts, for example, are sexts.

2 The essay was originally published in Monika Mitášová, “Akty aktualizovania aktov. Sexty a texty Holých bab,” *Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research* 12, no. 1 (2011): 44-53. The author analyses the exhibition *Nudes. Uncensored Works by Modern Masters*, which by its critical reading of female nudes by modernist artists from the Slovak National Gallery collection, and above all by its feminist commentary in the form of comics, aroused wide interest among the professional and lay public.

3 Paraphrase of the question “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?” from the eponymous poster (1989) of the US feminist group Guerrilla Girls.

the periphery of civil society. Creative work across such a fixedly perceived hierarchy is possible, and it actually allows for the emergence and effective functioning of temporary alliances of “governmental” and “non-governmental” organisations, to produce artistic and cultural projects that could not be achieved otherwise. Their critical, re-evaluating and founding energies are distributed in polyvalent and multi-directional ways, not exclusively supporting the centre/periphery structure of art and culture.

### Act I.

Public exhibitions of art with introductory words and commentary in various forms are common gallery practice nowadays. On the one hand, galleries and museums offer a **curatorial interpretation** of their temporary and permanent exhibitions and popularise them with **lecturers’ interpretations**; on the other hand, the exhibitions themselves contain various types and genres of interpretive texts. In past times, predominantly there were exhibitions of the most varied artistic credos, with an accompanying literary text (in poetry or prose), alternatively a scholarly text (by an art expert, art historian or aesthetician). Then and now, in a special place between all of these are the words of philosophers, which do not incline towards either the artistic or scholarly texts, but generally formulate the concepts which influence thinking about art, science/scholarship, or philosophy itself. That is evidently the source of their popularity in contemporary art and philosophy. They find less of a welcome in art historiography, where the scholars paradoxically feel that philosophical definitions are “foreign” to their own thinking, to art theory and historical science. The recent wave of curatorial exhibitions has changed the exhibition to an artwork *sui generis*, and it has provided further mixed and expanded models of interpretation of art, combining “humanities” and “natural sciences” commentaries with artistic and philosophical commentaries. In this sense, the *Nudes* project deviates, as it were, from the surge of curatorial exhibitions. It is a temporary exhibition of nudes with a commentary, which the curator initiated and delegated to feminist authors. To all appearances, she thereby renounces the exclusive curatorial creation of the exhibition as an artwork; it is as if she has newly “de-artistified” the exhibition. The invited co-authors have taken over the artworks (appropriated them) in feminist comics (installation, environment). Ultimately, then, they have returned artistic quality to the exhibition, “re-artistified” it anew and differently. While this need not be evident at first glance, *Nudes* is actually a curatorial project in a pair of masks: the mask of “de-artistification” of the exhibition, and the mask of its “re-artistification.”

That is to say, the exhibition – feminist spatial comics (environment) – came into being in a temporary cluster of authorial interpretive roles, which swapped places and shared authorial competencies. It is not the product of an individual author or a mass of authorships (whether a random authorial crowd or a group with a defined authorial programme). Rather, it was created by a relatively loose band, a “pack” of authorships that shared out the interpretation of the artworks at the given time and delegated it in a duo, in a trio, and in the entire quartet throughout the commentary. This authorial project was open also in other senses of the word. Its original working concept and title, drawn up by the curator Petra Hanáková with the art scholar Dušan Brozman, was as follows: *Works by Modernist Masters in the Hands of Feminists*<sup>4</sup> ... The curator therefore chose nudes specifically “for” the delegated feminist commentary. Even though it seems that she reserved for herself only the neutral role of the “selector of nudes” from the SNG’s depositories, this choice of hers is an interpretation already. The

4 Petra Hanáková proposed this title during discussion of the *Nudes* exhibition in the ASPEKT library on 1.12. 2010 in Bratislava.

artists had created works of various kinds (not one of them was exclusively a painter of nudes); she makes them principally “bare-babers”,<sup>5</sup> much as she might have made them “landscape painters” or makers of “still lifes” or some other genres. Simultaneously, the curator updates their works primarily through the nudes and presents the artists in a mask of curatorial neutrality, delegating commentary to another authorial subject. But who is it that chooses the modern nude from the works of modernist masters and updates these works of theirs with the “Bare Babes” exhibition? The curator. For this updating of the nude, who chooses and writes (updates) the feminist commentary, and who finally unites both in one topical form of publication and exhibition? The hands and probably also other parts of the bodies of the writing feminists and feminist-artist, giving an artistic form to this conjunction of image and word. Just as the exhibition makes bare-babers of the painters, so also by the choice of authors, texts, and visual (comics) form, it makes speech-bubble writers and artists. Not only are exhibition and works interpreted by the authors, but the authors themselves are interpreted by the exhibition and works. From the more or less classical schedule of its authorial team, one might have assumed that the exhibition would have some scholarly (let us say, autonomously art-scholarly or art-historical) commentary, and some feminist commentary. But the point of the curatorial project’s artistic mask is, it appears, in the fact that an exhibition whose impact is especially, or exclusively, as an artwork actually does not need or presuppose any autonomously art-scholarly commentary (an exhibition of art, and a curatorial exhibition, do presuppose that). Is there simply no autonomously art-scholarly commentary in the *Nudes* exhibition? Or has it somehow (in itself or in its autonomy) been transformed? Perhaps it will be possible to reply to this question via those lines of interpretation which, beneath the exhibition’s masks, are dimly outlined.

## Act II.

The first, curatorial line of interpretation of *Nudes* is formulated in the curator’s text, where Petra Hanáková writes:

With a naked woman, one can do all sorts of things in visual art. Apart from themes and associations that are erotic (the staging of desire or such “female qualities” as submissiveness, softness, inaccessibility, or on the other hand disposability...), for visual artists the “bare babe” embodies literally a universal instrument. With the naked female body one can imagine, illustrate or “metaphorize” almost everything: abiding and transient love; motherhood, hygiene and intimacy (Galanda, Nevan, Guderna); power, aggression and violence (Sokol, Majerník); misery and fear (Weisz-Kubínčan); primitivism in both good and bad senses of the word (Sokol, Filko), individual and social liberalism (Mlynárčik)... Apart from its iconographic potential, however, in Slovak art also the exploitation of the female body represents above all a problem of formalism. The female body is where the Master’s hand gets its practice... But the “Kollerian” question hangs always in the air: does the given artist in his creative “conquests” always give fair play in his game? (...) Almost without exception, Slovak artists have a liking for monumental women. They are fascinated by the shapes of full, rounded, statuesque bodies (hence their canon is a long way removed from the sickly photoshop type in fashion today). (...) The attractiveness of the naked muse will probably be eternal: it knows no ideological restrictions...<sup>6</sup>

5 Jana Cviková et al., *Holé baby: Necenzurované akty moderných majstrov [NUDES Uncensored Works by Modern Masters.]* (Bratislava: Slovenská národná galéria, 2010), 34-35. Ed. note: “barebaber” (holobabáč) – is a neologism, produced by combining the word *holý* (bare) and *baba* (babe, slang for woman) transposed to the masculine gender, is derived from the exhibition’s Slovak title. Ironically and comically, it designates a man (artist) focusing on and with a preference for (portraying) naked women (nudes).

6 Ibid. Ed. note: A reference to the conceptual art of Július Koller, to his eternally recurring question mark and synthesis of play and ordinary life, whose aim was to make “life” a cultural game with just and stable rules for everyone.

The curator here takes command of the world of art from contemporary positions (the Kollerian question of fair play?), and simultaneously points to the eternal attractiveness of the naked muse. From the present time and from eternity, it is difficult to find one's way to a memory of the nude genre and to the story of its interpretation in art history. In this situation, is it actually the curator's effort at neutrality that highlights art history and art scholarship? The curator's "neutral" position apparently gives preference to the autonomy (rather than heteronomy) of the laws of art, but paradoxically, without regarding as binding: A. the laws of artistic creation (and issuing from those, the historical value of works); B. the laws of interpretation of this art production (issuing from which is the current value of works); and C. the laws of art itself, namely the relationships that artworks themselves assume with one another – let us say, the artist associates with a work of the past and by adding his own, creates "a developmental line" of works (and hence also their developmental value). It is evident that regarding the nude as a universal instrument of art could also mean that this instrument is transformed under the influence of all three aforementioned laws of art (creation, interpretation, and mutual relation). The seemingly neutral curatorial line of interpretation of *Nudes*, however, flees either to the present or to eternity, away from the question of the autonomy of art and "its" history. Because it is itself "historic"; the exhibition's subtitle says: *Uncensored Works by Modern Masters*. The works concerned are from the SNG's collections, and therefore only with difficulty can one speak of any censorship (some of them are less well known, but the fact that that art experts took "just so much" interest in them as to buy them for the SNG's collections, does not mean that they were censored) ... In what sense therefore are these "uncensored nudes"? Has feminist commentary on the nude been censored up to now in Slovakia? At the close of the 20th century, the feminist journal *Aspekt* published texts on the theme of feminist interpretation of art and architecture; they included opinions on male and female nudes. The journal was not always welcomed and was even ostracised, but it was not censored or self-censored. What is it that is highlighted in this "announcement" about uncensored nudes in the "Bare Babes" exhibition? Wasn't it actually art scholarship and art history that ignored, if it did not immediately "censor", feminist commentary on nudes by modern and modernist masters in Slovakia? And is the aim now to symbolically "silence" for a while this impercipient and "censoring" art scholarship and art history, and to address those who have everyday experience of the influencing of "press freedom", along with the language law, in Slovakia: the mass media? To sneer, as hooligan-feminists, at the modernists and their nudes, and at the same time, work up an impression that the project is not at all about updating the art of the nude and kowtowing to masters; and this time not walled off by a university department, in circles of feminist initiates or in specialised publications, but before the most numerous mainstream public and in the mass media? Does "scandalising feminist" commentary have to popularise the modern and modernist nude in this "sickly photoshop mode" and get it into the mass communication media in a new cool form, because otherwise art and an art exhibition would find it very hard to get into those media nowadays? Not to mention feminism.

The second line of commentary is manifestly aware of these and other escape routes and pitfalls, and therefore it hears the call to a "feminist commentary" of nudes by modern masters, follows and undermines it, and turns it upside-down. Where the curatorship wished to abolish intersubjectivity and conceal its own work of interpreting the history of the nude under the mask of an art exhibition with delegated commentary, the authors of the comics texts create their commentary as a fictional dialogue of female persons visiting the "Bare Babes" exhibition. On the walls, where only institutional,



tutorial and curatorial interpretations had been given free play, Jana Juráňová and Jana Cviková have put comics – a play in 155 acts (in 155 theatrical and artistic pictures), in which two virtual viewers – granny and granddaughter (Mama has no time for walking around galleries) debate about the exhibited nudes – and comment on them. An invitation to the long-serving authors and editors of the feminist journal *Aspekt*, clearly presupposed an encounter of the paintings with the language and discourse of the “founders” of the feminist movement in Slovakia; what they say would have some relation to their international forebears (whose texts are translated in *Aspekt*) and to their postfeminist successors and the contemporary cool criticism of “feminism without women”, or would relate to the massive popularity of the stop feminism web pages, hence in response to the “men and women without feminism” movement. But it is not the “founders” of some universal activist, scholarly or artistic feminism who are debating about the “Bare Babes.” The debate about them is conducted by a virtual granny-feminist, of a scintillating wit and pontificating manner, with a somewhat amused, disgusted, ashamed, provoked virtual pre-feminist granddaughter, who cannot be pigeonholed in any of the former or current feminisms, anti-feminisms or non-feminisms. At most she may become (or not become) a feminist; one cannot say that she is or is not one; rather, she is in a borderline situation of becoming (a woman, feminist, non-feminist...). This virtual (model) couple speak of what they see in the exhibited paintings, read in the captions under the pictures, and at the same time keep a conversation going. (...)

The virtual granny at the current exhibition appears also in the role of “feminist wise woman” (evidently some anachronistic variant of the archetypal wise old woman, who is capable of such leaps from the time and space of the language of initiation to the time and space of the language of desecration of the nude and feminism). And yet the granny’s knowledge of the nude and of feminism is not some original and genuine source of eternal knowing. It is a plurality of currents approaching and receding from knowledge in momentary insights, jokes, citations and paraphrases of classical feminist writing (including feminist art scholarship) on the prevailing patriarchal or phallo-logo-centric view of woman and the female body in the world of art and outside it. The virtual granddaughter also plays the role of a “feminist novice” (a remarkable version of the archetypal innocent virgin, who at times knows “nothing” or only “very little” about feminism, while at other times she knows “enough” or indeed “too much”), while at the same time constantly subverting her status of innocent novice: sometimes laughing, while at other times all of those (to quote granny) “bare babes, bare diddies, bare diddies, bare diddies... bare bottoms...”,<sup>7</sup> thrust upon her with almost unbearable concentration and intensity by the exhibited nudes, getting on her nerves. She is ashamed also of looking at them or talking about them in public; on account of them, she even shouts at granny, preaches and admonishes her, as if granny were a small child with a simple vocabulary, a granny/“younger sister” of the granddaughter/“older sister”, whom she, “the elder of the sisters” and simultaneously grandchild, is duty-bound to induct in what “belongs” in public and what does not (referring to some kind of handed-down, lived morality, an ethi/c/quette of behaving in a gallery and (not) commenting on the art of the nude in public).[...]

With their third, artistic line of commentary on the “Bare Babes”, the authors visually combined nude *Akts* and acts of commentary in “gallery comics”. (...) The artistic nudes are installed classically on the walls, hence in a zone of ideal visibility in groups according to authors and “themes.” Captions are just beneath them. But the coloured comics bubbles with the dialogue of virtual granny and grandchild are



scattered not only on the walls between paintings, but also on the floor and ceiling of the exhibition halls. While the artistic nudes create an interrupted line – continuity, the comics bubbles create spatial diffusion, which both eases and makes more difficult their “attribution” and reading (defies ideal legibility). *Nudes* “facilitate” the approach to an ideal and idealised vision of “mastery” of the artistic nude, and “impede” the approach to a reading of the instructive-subversive “mastery” of the feminist act of turning-into-comics. The line of the paintings is also a time axis; the bubbles with theatrical pictures are also a non-chronological Brownian motion of commentary granules on surfaces (the installation areas of each exhibition hall in the gallery). The bubbles with “heavy text” are also feather-light, they rise in the space, and those with the “easing text” are also heavy, falling to the floor. These are instructive texts in a mask of facilitation and facilitating texts in a mask of instruction. The bubbles, and the bearers and masks of the commenting, when they touch on the artistic nude may at any time symbolically “hone attention” or alternatively “explode” and sheer off in terms of significance and diffuse attention (together with “the place of the act of feminist commenting”) to the exhibition. All the time, the ideal place for the artistic nude, round which texts in speech-bubbles whirl in disorder, remains reliably and stably reserved by the gallery institution and its tried-and-tested installation rules.

All these three lines of commentating are (together) similarly at work in the *Nudes* exhibition, as a band of authors and a “pack” of authorships. They show that the word can highlight both verbal and visual pictoriality, and the image in turn may highlight both visual and verbal literariness. In this sense they are also differentiating, and they pose the question of who and what is actually “representing” here, and how. Curatorial choice, meanwhile, works with an idea of the artistic world’s fair play and with a privileged place for viewing the masterworks of art. The curator confirms the mastery of the modernists and neo-modernists, and with them also her own (neutral vis-à-vis gender and feminist art scholarship, and this precisely where feminism and femininity in art come into play). Gender-sensitive and feminist commentary, supplied by the authors of the commentaries, operates with a stage set (theatrical play) and comics (comedy play), hence a “one-actor in 155 acts”... Comics work with a decentred view, a peripheral vision and gaze fixed on the *Nude* and feminism; the speech-bubble writers undermine the mastery of the modernists, seemingly without interest in building a single mastery of gender-sensitive and feminist commentary, although they do themselves create and represent some kind of mastery (and some kind of authorship). An artistic conception of this stage play and comic play connects the preceding lines of commentary, gives them hierarchy and makes them chaotic (working with basic colours, the visual artist lets the modernists’ mastery burst apart in many primary-colours-and-atomic-relations bubbles). And her own art mastery also: she constructs it as gender-mixed and newly differentiating, seeking basic genders in the mixtures and hybrids of biological and transgender conceptions of feminism in visual culture. Then, simultaneously achieves a de-territorialisation of the gaze fixed on the painting (all at once), via a leap from image to text (read progressively, linear fashion) and conversely, a de-territorialisation of the gaze that reads the text (in Slovak left to right, from top to bottom), via a leap from reading text to gazing at the image (saccadic vision, randomly moving along the entire surface of the painting, focalising and dissipating, branching off from and also fixing the places of return). In other words, in this “dadaist” self-referential comics the visual act is stripped bare of the verbal, and in contrast, the verbal act is clothed with the visual, though this never happens completely, always they somehow pass by each other, collide, and overlap, or the one fails to cover the other and they cannot “join” together

without something excluded. In this sense, the “Bare Babes” are clothed/unclothed in language, stripped/dressed up in the image. Verbality is “their” subverso-legitimizing act and destruct. Visuality too, but differently: arranging-chaoticising. The word finds itself in the mask of a visual play, the visual image in a mask of literalness. (...)

In what, then, are the “Bare Babes” gender-sensitive and feminist? The virtual dialogue updates the language of the granny/woman initiated and initiating to feminism, but also the woman who illuminates. She herself has a burning zeal for feminism and fans the flame in herself and others; she does not ignite the passion in her granddaughter, probably so that other female novice-curators, artists and art scholars may burn or be burned (women who would understand feminism, Heraclitus-style, as monistic, as the one and only *arché* – the single eternal flame / super-element beyond all the elements of art, or simply as pure archaism). Another reason may be: so that this language of the (illuminating and enlightening) granny, which despite being a monologue is from the outset a multi-utterance, might also evoke some unscripted and unforeseen response from the grandchild/girl, who is “letting” herself be introduced to the world of feminism inasmuch as she too, like the granny, does not find herself in the SNG transformed to a gallery of ritual initiation<sup>8</sup>: sometimes she listens and looks like a pupil, but then again she is defiantly a preacher and a heretic, a nutcase and a woman of sense, conspiratorially – however, all of these are masks. She “herself” (naked), using these attested masks/roles unobtrusively becomes newly enlightened and initiated and simultaneously debunking and desecrating. One who sometimes ignites and sometimes extinguishes acts, and differently from the granny. Carnival-style. Without a single unambiguously ascribable homogeneous identity. Without anyone gaping at her (a pedagogically supervising granny included). The grandchild’s masked absence and concurrent changes are not laid bare in the dialogue; they remain hidden and hinted-at, and therefore the comics may perhaps have given them still more opportunity to disrupt the paraded nudity of the artworks and the nudity of feminist slogans (after all, while those move the action along, they change nothing very notably; they do not create key changes in the plot). The question remains, in whose “hands” the authors should now “deposit” these comics of theirs, so that they might continue differently, and so that critical art-scholarly and art-historical feminist narratives of the nude might be written (...)

## Conclusion

“Do women have to be naked to get into the SNG?” No, they don’t. Do they have to be in a mask of nudity?

8 Ed. note: *RITuál* – here there is an untranslatable Slovak pun on the word *rituál* (ritual), with the large letters indicating the coarse word for buttocks (RIT = ARSE). In the spoken Slovak language this word is used exceptionally; here the humorously identified “root word” plays on the pronunciation of the Latin-derived word *rituál*.

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# FROM A PUBLIC MUSEUM TO A MUSEUM OF THE PUBLIC<sup>1</sup>

(SHORTENED)

Museums are one of the cultural hybrids of modernity generating and reproducing social order by rendering reality less ambiguous. Its hybridity stems as much from the fact that it combines a number of contradictory functions as from the ambivalences it engenders. Like most modern institutions meant to provide order, the museum brings chaos through its order-creating activities, while the explicitness it is striving to produce comes at the price of expanding the field of ambivalence.<sup>2</sup>

The primary goal of the modern museum was to protect what had been defined as cultural heritage of a given community, to conduct research on it, and to educate the community about it.<sup>3</sup> Modern museums were public by definition, while universal access to them underpinned by the egalitarian principle was viewed as symbolic of democratisation and enlightenment. However, each of these basic functions can be countered with others which, although never directly articulated, were integral to the logic behind the workings of this institution.

The modern museum conserved as much as it destroyed the cultural heritage of a community as its collection represented exclusively what met with the approval of dominant groups, consigning everything else to oblivion and decomposition. Exercising the authority of science, the institution validated ideologized narratives as historical objectivity, while its ability to create history and transform it into a visually appealing spectacle consolidated the authority of science.<sup>4</sup>

While the museum did perform its educational role, it was also instrumental in uprooting being one of the means used by the modern state to turn “peasants into

1 The text was originally published in Marek Krajewski, “Od muzeum publicznego do muzeum publiczności,” in *Muzeum jako świetlany przedmiot pożądania*, ed. Jarosław Lubiak (Łódź: MSL, 2007).

2 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Ithaca NY (Cornell University Press, 1991).

3 The definition of the museum provided by the British Museums Association: “Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens which they hold in trust for society” (<http://www.museumsassociation.org/faq>).

4 Scott Bukatman, *Matter of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 111–30.

Frenchmen” or “Silesians into Poles.”<sup>5</sup> Thanks to unified school and museum systems, state celebrations of new national traditions, “statuomania” that involved erecting monuments to the nation and its heroes, as well as countless other activities, the traditional multicultural society was slowly receding, leaving room for nationalist monoculturalism, which pivoted on denying the existence of local, religious, racial, gender and sexual differences within the national community.<sup>6</sup> At the museum, community members encountered, for the most part, an imagological spectacle of consensus on who we are, a spectacle which wasn’t necessarily directly referencing nationalist ideology, but unfailingly underscored the alleged monoculturalism of modern communities, variegated though they were. Monoculturalism could manifest itself in the approach to cultural and biological evolution, technological progress, transformations observed in the arts and crafts, non-Western ways of living, human anatomy and geologic problems, but regardless of the subject matter on show, expositions were always designed to convey the message that there was only one narrative capable of explaining the world as it was, and that knowing it was a prerequisite for full participation in social life, rewarded with a high social position, respectability, power and wealth. The diversity of museum collections and the drive to make nature, animals and savages specimens in a museum were, thus, illusory as they all stated the same, constituting a monofunctional instrument used by the modern state for producing consent. Although public by assumption, the museum never became so. That narrative and ideological heterogeneity wasn’t possible here, unless perhaps in the form of brutal iconoclasm, wasn’t the only reason; the museum was (and still remains) one of the essential tools of symbolic violence. It is not by accident that the lower classes tend to feel uneasy here, unable to find anything related to their cultural universe. A means of cultural uprooting, the museum causes social exclusion and class segregation as well.

### Barriers to Making the Museum Public

The modern order, programmed and methodically implemented, is an emanation and proof positive of human rationality. It is founded on segregation, exclusion, oblivion and repudiation, all aimed at constructing an effective mechanism – an easily steerable mechanism as it is driven by the perpetual notion of cultural uniformity.

This status of the museum, or the fact that it constitutes a functional element of an order based on exclusion and violence, cannot be changed by any action taken to reform it, accompanying attempts to realign Western democratic order. By this I mean a number of initiatives undertaken over the last half century, and notably: breaking with the monologism and didacticism of the ways in which collections are displayed; democratising collections by giving voice to cultures and communities so far marginalised and excluded; understanding a collection as an impulse to individual storytelling, rather than a closed narrative; turning museums into laboratories or places for the production of works, not their mummification; transforming the institution into a cultural mall, or a space for a consumable multimedia spectacle; and, last but not least, converting the museum so that the collection becomes less significant than the architecture that protects it.<sup>7</sup>

5 See Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2002). Eric Hobsbawm, “Mass-producing tradition Europe 1870-1914,” in *Representing The Nation: A Reader – history, heritage & museums*, ed. David Boswell and Jessica Evans (London: Routledge, 1999). Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism. New Perspectives on the Past* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), and others.

6 See especially Hobsbawm.

7 See Jaromir Jedliński, “Sztuka wystawiania sztuki,” *Czas Kultury*, no. 4-5 (1999); Hermann Lübke, “Muzealizacja. O powiązaniu naszej teraźniejszości z przeszłością,” in *Estetyka w*

At first sight, all these actions seem to be symptomatic of a radical change in the function performed by the museum as well as the way it functions, a transformation of its relation to the social world. But these revisions generally only simulate changes consistent with the altering social order, while in fact maintaining the institution's status as a place of exclusion and symbolic violence.

In other words, reshaping the social status of the museum takes more than rejecting the evolutionary and one-sided approach to cultural transformation represented by the collection, painting the walls in saturated colours, providing expressive lighting for paintings, mounting displays in post-industrial buildings, even turning the building into a globally identifiable pop icon, a centre of pilgrimage for millions. It is not enough to open exhibition rooms to cultures absent from them before, banned from visible social life or invalidated by dominant groups; neither is it enough to introduce attention parity among things produced by particular groups in a multicultural society, or to stage workshops for the children of those who have never been to a museum, or to announce that entry is free on a specified weekday. These things matter a lot, but their effect on the very idea behind the museum is close to non-existent, they fail to decisively influence its cultural role and its relation towards the social order. Were we to ask why all these changes are merely apparent, the basic answer would be that they go nowhere near the logic of the workings of the museum as an institution. According to this logic, the museum has been conceived to store, protect and transport in time whatever carries particular weight in a society and what makes a collective into a cultural community. Inherent in it is the notion that, firstly, there exist identifiable criteria for differentiating between outcomes produced by a community that are of particular importance to it and those that are negligible and destined to sink into collective oblivion; secondly, that there is someone competent enough to make that division. The persistence of this first notion means that only artefacts similar to those the collection already contains are included in it. In consequence, democratisation of the museum tends to consist in adding artefacts produced by heretofore marginalised groups that look like works created by dominant cultures (this visual similarity is why museums today put on display "folk art," pictures painted by women artists, sculptures made by gay artists, drawings by the intellectually disabled, Native American ornaments, etc.), rather than in extending the definition of what can be recognised as cultural practice, artistic activity, notable material article, or document. The idea that it is possible today to lay down criteria for determining what is culturally valuable and deserves to be explored, safeguarded and transferred into the future is not only ethnocentric, it also ignores the fact that no foundation for such choice can be found nowadays because of the deep democratisation of social life that brings about a lack of consent as to what is of value, and because the horizon of the future became blurry a long time ago. That horizon helped us determine what should be kept from the past to make it possible for the community and order to go on.

The other notion behind the museum – the conviction that there are people sufficiently qualified to separate the wheat from the chaff, in the interests of all members of modern communities – relies on the assumption that the extreme narrowing of professional specialisation leading to fragmentation of knowledge and "ignorance explosion,"<sup>8</sup> doesn't apply to cultural production. Thus, those who manage cultural institutions are in a position from which they can grasp/see the entirety of cultural

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świecie. *Wybór tekstów*, ed. Maria Gołaszewska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 1991); Diane Ghirardo, *Architecture after Modernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1996).

8 Juliusz Łukasiewicz, *Eksploracja ignorancji. Czy rozumiemy cywilizację przemysłową?* (Warszawa: Oficyna naukowa, 2000).



practices and decide which of them are more valuable than others, if at all. Of course, this is not to say that there are no agents in the art world who can do that, but I find it extremely difficult to think of a place or position from which you can see everything. The problem here is that the social power over cultural production, which also includes the production of communities, is delegated to a small group of specialists – just like the authority to decide what is health and what is disease is delegated to the agents of the medical world. However, unlike the latter, functionaries of cultural institutions manage a lot more than a narrow sector of our lives; they have the power to define who we are and will be, which cultural practices matter, what a work of art is, who is free to create and can be heard, what is worth our time, attention, and interpretative effort, what competencies are required to partake in the life of a community. To put it in yet another way: all tasks that used to be completed by means of intra-community interactions through which members of a community agreed on how to live, have been entrusted to them. In democratic societies, this kind of social power is only given to those chosen by people to represent them; their actions are supervised by control authorities, such as the judiciary and free media. Otherwise, unlawful usurpation is taking place, an attempt at monopolising activities we all should be entitled to undertake.

### **The Museum of the Public**

The basic problem with museums is that they are hardly public. Everyone can enter a museum, but not everyone will find something in it that represents their culture, way of life, preferences, aesthetic tastes or hierarchy of values. What we usually encounter here is a spectacle of another culture eager to prove its own uniqueness by having its products displayed in a place that is supposed to protect what is essential to society. If we see this experience as problematic – and we should if we agree that the democratic system is all about equality before the law and the universal right to participate in the production of social order and culture – then we should try and make museums more public. A solution is not to be sought in attracting an audience that is both wide and variegated in terms of gender, social class, race, ethnicity, age and world view,<sup>9</sup> but in the creation of a museum in which each and every one of us would be able to find a reflection of themselves. The museum ought to make each visitor feel unique and capable of self-creation and partaking in the development of social order.

This can be achieved, first of all, by democratising the museum and acknowledging members of the public as active creators, not passive viewers. For this to happen, creativity must be sought in places from which it seems absent at first sight, in everyday practices carried out by individuals trying to fit in in the world. The varying and unstable contexts of our daily lives makes courage as well as imagination indispensable for survival and protecting one's individuality. Attention is due not only to creators working in enclaves to which the society has assigned the task of creation or art partisans poaching on grounds controlled by dominant groups (graffiti artists, jammers, adbusters, sticker artists, hackers, etc.), but also to those who refuse to follow ways of life devised by others or socially accepted methods of questioning them – people trying to live their own lives. Creation in this sense comprises a great variety of DIY practices pursued by individuals in response to the material world around them (decorating balconies and gardens, making objects from found materials, clothing alterations, tacking, darning and patching, designing

<sup>9</sup> This is highly important but shouldn't be seen as the central problem. Turning the museum into a commercial temple of art focused on providing entertainment doesn't overcome the shortage of its public character, but equates it with the mass character and negates individual diversity by offering whatever may be attractive to all, without conveying any significant message. This is more to do with the cultured than the cultural.



one's own interior, styling one's geekosphere,<sup>10</sup> beautifying truck cabs, finding new uses for manufactured devices,<sup>11</sup> and many others), eloquent practices undertaken by contemporary fans of pop culture productions,<sup>12</sup> cultural practices by the youth, sexual minorities and enthusiasts of physical effort,<sup>13</sup> jamming commercial culture with digital devices,<sup>14</sup> and many others. All these activities have one thing in common: unorchestrated human creativity, not meant to challenge the system and established cultural practices, but simply a spontaneous endeavour to do things one's way, a mode of dealing with reality, or a way of self-fulfilment.

The assumption that it is worthwhile and profitable to redefine the idea of the museum by tracking creativity where we don't expect to find it seems to be echoing Beuys's famous slogan "everyman is an artist," but the similarity is only apparent; the latter relied on a vision of social order in which everyman (being) an artist was free to engage in the creation<sup>15</sup> of what had been predetermined by the initiator of social sculpture. Here, on the other hand, the form of social order is not being redefined, but is a subject of continuing negotiations, debates, interactions, short-term alliances and breaches that all have a part in the making of public space. This is because public space isn't essentially founded on a shared system of values viewed as the accepted way of self-realisation or on an only imaginable way of life, tastes, and preferences.<sup>16</sup> If the museum is supposed to be a place for the celebration of things crucial to a society or community, things that make it distinctive and unique, then it should be more of a process than a place, based on inclusion rather than exclusion, on wide participation rather than expert knowledge. Its principal objective shouldn't be to select and legitimise as culturally valuable whatever the art world believes significant, but to monitor reality in search of grassroots modes of creativity, to give them visibility and provide examples showing that to live a life of one's own is possible, and doable. Still, the point is not to create anything like police archives holding every sign of imagination and creative activity, but to testify to their sheer abundance and diversity, and to demonstrate that culture is not produced exclusively in art galleries, academies, concert halls, poets' studios, painters' ateliers, at universities, but wherever individuals make effort to adapt to reality and build up relationships with other people.

Meant to do away with its archaic and exclusive character, such a way of making the museum public is adopted to achieve a political purpose and to bring democracy to culture as well, but it is as much an answer to the changing forms of cultural participation and transforming viewer collectives. The traditional model of the museum

10 *Geekosphere* is the space surrounding a geek's computer, including alterations to the monitor or disc drives, the appearance of the desk, etc.

11 For instance, homemade vehicles, Frania washing machines used for mixing alcohol, neodymium magnets used for stealing electricity, compact discs used as ornaments, etc.

12 Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, *Audiences. A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination* (London: SAGE, 1998); Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

13 For example, extreme sports such as parkour, turbo golf, and others.

14 I'm talking here about activities undertaken for reasons other than ideological (as in the case of culture jamming or subvertising), all activities that make the receptive act an expressive practice in the literal sense, leading to the emergence of new images and sounds built around mainstream commercial culture.

15 Although all people were supposed to be free, equal and creative, there was still a person who set the goal of their activities, aimed at the construction of a total work of art around a new social order that this person believed to be positive and desired. Beuys's concept of "social sculpture" was an intriguing and worthwhile form of criticism against capitalism and real socialism, but as an idea of social order it failed to differ from them. Like any implemented social utopia, it was bound to become total and ensnaring because it assumed that all individuals were the same and held the same values, that all could be made happy in the same way.

16 Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions. Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge-London: MIT, 1996).

relied on an asymmetric and one-way communication that involved clearly defined and institutionalised roles of senders (selectors – curators, researchers, etc.) and receivers (viewers), and strongly ritualised participation practices.

The revolution that is happening today in the ways of participation seems to revolve around two basic processes. Firstly, most cultural productions are beginning to provide a basis for the creation of new artefacts by the audience. Secondly, it is increasingly difficult for us to determine where cultural participation begins and ends, who the audience is and when they become it.<sup>17</sup> The first of these processes results boils down to a number of things: increasing cultural competency of viewers, growing popularity of interactive communication media and cheap devices allowing their users to process images and sounds, but also the emergence of receiving communities that attribute senses to mainstream cultural productions through interaction, exchange of information, reviewing, and undertaking activities that have influence on producers,<sup>18</sup> etc. The other process is an outcome of two phenomena: turning social life into a spectacle, saturating perceptual space with visual and acoustic cultural artefacts in a way that makes encountering them inescapable, and theatricalisation of interpersonal relations, fetishisation of image and life style as the basic means of experiencing oneself and others. As a result of all this, we are not only viewers everywhere and at all times, we also have to create new messages and performances in order to be someone.

In this new context, the museum with its staid display and its uninspired interpretation, with its claim to convey the truth about a phenomenon, a process or history, with its definition of the viewer as someone supposed to read the narrative the museum has created, is not only archaic, but it is also totally strange and unreadable to contemporary audiences. This problem is not to be solved by what we tend to see so often today – more multimodality and spectacular presentations. Their importance lies in the fact that they make use of tools familiar to contemporary audiences, but they are merely the means, frequently mistaken for the end. Another visually attractive spectacle is not the answer; to make the museum a place where viewers may experience and better understand the context they are embedded in, where they can see and understand themselves, a place open to their new competencies and their ability to produce cultural artefacts by themselves, the media of spectacularising reality should be applied. If the institution is to remain “the house of the muses,” it should not only depict our current inspirations, but also provide opportunities to create, not confined to a narrow group of people. The changing modes of cultural participation and the increasing ability of every one of us to generate cultural messages should find their reflection in the ways in which museums work, in the structure of exposition, in making the museum a space in which meanings flow, rather than fossilise. What we need today aren’t public museums, but museums of the public – museums conceived of as institutional spaces of value within conflict occurring in a variegated society, as a place for the display of what makes us different and, at the same time, of what gives us individuality.

17 A new type of audience has appeared described by Abercrombie and Longhurst as “diffused”, see: Abercrombie and Longhurst.

18 Jenkins.

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# WILL THE CZECHS EVER BE MODERN?<sup>1</sup>

(SHORTENED)

In this essay, Vít Havránek comments not only on the situation surrounding the dismissed directors of the National Gallery Prague (NGP), but also on the non-transparent and authoritarian relationship of the founder of the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic (MKČR) to the cultural institutions themselves. The author names the problems related to the managerial position taken by the Ministry towards culture and deals with possible solutions that would lead the NGP out of a long-term crisis.

Minister Staněk very scrupulously avoided the cultural terrain and the evaluation of the activities of the NGP. Like his predecessors, he wanted to be the minister of cultural management, not the minister of culture. At the press conference, he presented a three-page list of misconduct that, since 2016, the audits and controls of the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic have accused the gallery's management of. It is not a detailed report, but it does not act as a purely purposeful document either. If we are not possessed by an a priori distrust of the independence of state bureaucratic control, we must recognize that cultural merit cannot justify institutional and economic misconduct in the management of a contribution organization. However, the dramaturgy of the NGP, mainly pursuing the goal of making the tastes of culturally enlightened international and economic elites accessible to a mass audience, is not in controversy with current government policy, rather it quietly mirrors it. Therefore, this is not a struggle against the background of different policies, it is a struggle of individuals or factions for power within a single – liberal neoliberal – current. The problem could also be posed from the opposite side – what attributes would a minister earn who would not act in the event that the audit of his office drew attention to serious misdeeds? However, it is alarming that the only one who has really relevant information today is the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic. They are not available to the scientific council of the NGP (which is silent), employees, journalists, and experts. This points to a serious democratic deficit. The current crisis is a challenge that leads all who are not indifferent to the fate and mission of the NGP to demands for structural change.

1 The text was originally published in Vít Havránek, “Budou Češi někdy moderní?,” *Artalk.cz*, 29.04.2019, <https://artalk.cz/2019/04/29/budou-cesi-nekdy-moderni/>, accessed 7.09.2023.

### Accept and revoke

The criticism also lies in the “brutality” of the appeal, which was not discussed either in political circles or with the wider or professional public, but happened out of the blue, so to speak, in an hour. As an eyewitness, I must return to the appointment of director Jiří Fajt, which was a forerunner of his dismissal. Then the Minister of Culture, Alena Hanáková, initiated the selection process and appointed a committee (of which I was a member) to select the general director from the three candidates of the previous audition. The commission met several times and also asked Jiří Fajt to update the program with which he applied to run the largest Czech art museum. Before Jiří Fajt and other candidates could update their several-year-old program, however, the ministerial director was appointed directly, without the commission’s knowledge. It must be added that Minister Hanáková resigned a month before and the entire government was in resignation. Neither the commission’s protest nor the letter from the former directors of the NGP to the new minister pointing out the weak legitimacy of the procedure had any effect. The forceful approach of politicians, which ignores the consensus with artists and experts from universities, the Academy of Sciences and the non-profit sector, in sum represents a strong cultural capital that has affected all those involved. Politicians thus build up an unprofessional, purely managerial status for a long time, and thus their unpopularity with educational and scientific institutions, which are artificially separated from the political and executive apparatus. All of this was ultimately reflected in the way the NGP itself was run.

Distrust (among politicians, but also artistic managers) in the standard republican mechanisms of the division of power, distrust in their bodies (administrative, scientific, expert councils, commissions, etc.), which are mistakenly mistaken for, for example, attendance and popularity, also result in that consensus procedures or conceptual documents are not commonly used here. In the event of a crisis, the debate has no factual basis, but slips into a cultural-political cabaret. If the director of the museum was appointed without having to formulate a program that would be in line with or controversial with cultural policy, defend it before a committee assessing its relevance to the field of museological studies, go through a network of interviews with ministerial officials regarding the organization and economy of management, on the contrary, he followed the path of authoritative appointment from above, what did he rely on other than the support of politicians? What should be used to judge whether he has fulfilled his mission or successfully started the transformation of the institution? This situation does not only concern Jiří Fajt, but is a chronic condition for NGP (it also concerned previous directors – Jiří Kotalík or Milan Knížák). It is a “one-man show” built on personal political support, or at best on building visitor popularity. At the same time, it avoids the public declaration of the historical task of the museum in connection with the concept of state support for culture, when the fragility of the personnel relationship conditions the possibility of fulfilling institutional goals. These goals are never realized by one person, but by a large team of gallery employees. Quality exhibitions, such as *František Kupka’s Retrospective*, *Marie Lassnig’s Exhibition*, *Julian Rosefeldt’s Manifesto*, the reinstallation of the permanent art collection from 1918-1938 or *Space for the Moving Image* etc., were created thanks to the historical richness of the NGP collections and the efforts of the curators and a number of gallery employees. Outwardly, however, in the hierarchy of institutions, they present themselves as the merit of one man.

The danger of the current situation takes us back to 2011, when the economist Vladimír Rösel was appointed as its head, and lies in the fact that the director’s main mission is organizational and economic stabilization. In the late period of the

managerial administration of the state, an economist associated with the government party dealt with the prime minister accused of subsidy fraud. How much stabilization in a row? It is as if NGP is doomed to oscillate between two periodically alternating states – organizational-economic stabilization or one-man show artistic management. Both of these states ignore the complex challenges facing the museum in relation to changes in social and economic conditions, to the evolution of knowledge about the world, history and art on a global scale.

### **Political manipulation of art**

And why should the National Gallery be a potential branch of the Center Pompidou instead of a “critical museum”? From a global point of view, it is known that this is a long-known strategy of centers to promote cultural hegemony in exchange for a tourist attractive brand – Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Center Pompidou in Malaga, Louvre in Abu Dhabi. However, no one presented the slightest consideration of the meaning and function that the Prague branch should fulfill, with the exception of the idea known from the 1990s of “catching up” with the West and large centers through a non-conflicting, non-historical adoption of their concept and form, “aesthetic contemplation” of the works of a culturally superior central canon. The old familiar dependence of provincial culture on the seamless and unproblematic glitz of the center is returning. But what better explanation can we expect from the new NGP leadership? Isn't the reconstruction project into a branch of the Center Pompidou a purely political operation, the aim of which is to culturally connect the western part of the former Eastern Europe to one of the centers of the European Union? Such a pro-European intention would need to be explicitly formulated at the political level, which would finally give rise to a politically ambitious debate. On the cultural level, it would be meaningful only on the condition that the prime minister (and all politicians) do not approach culture in a manipulative way, from the position of the owner of cultural capital, but respect the division of power enabling cultural autonomy and independence, which are a European historical achievement.

Since the 1990s, when there was a rather heated debate about the functions of the museum of modern and contemporary art, I have been convinced that we should get rid of the binding, centralist institution of the National Gallery and divide it into the Gallery of Old Art, the Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art, and the collection of non-European art connect with the Náprstek's Museum. Experience from around the world shows that museums divided in this way could be managed more efficiently, flexibly and professionally. Of course, a solution at the institutional level will not automatically bring a quality mission and program for any of the newly created parts. To do this, it is necessary to radically strengthen the expertise of the founder and to further acquire professionally and organizationally capable directors. But until the NGP splits, it is certain that institutional martyrdom will continue – the new director under the slogan of stabilization will strengthen centralized management and control. At the same time, NGP needs the exact opposite – decentralization and financial and dramaturgical autonomy of individual collections. And if an expert happened to succeed the economist, he would have to suffer from severe schizophrenia in order to voluntarily hand over his own power and responsibility for finances to his subordinate colleagues with great organizational difficulties. The second current step should be to change the rules for appointing and dismissing museum directors by the minister through administrative boards, whose members would be representatives of the founder and representatives of scientific, educational, non-profit and civic structures. These councils, functioning as standard in European countries, would release



museums from the purely personal nature of the relationship between the founder and the contributing organization and, among other things, would in the future be the body that must receive and assess the information that we have today in the event of the dismissal of two directors.

If we want to extricate the largest museum from a thirty-year-long cyclical crisis and restore hope for development in the future, the MKČR must hold auditions for museums that have already been divided. The various plans to establish branches of the Center Pompidou, the Center of Contemporary Art under Stalin (former mayor Adriana Krnáčová's plan) and megalomaniac reconstructions are just a hysterical cover-up of the uncertainty about the meaning of cultural identity and should be suspended or subject to a conceptual solution. All this must happen under the close attention of all involved, so that Czech politicians, who have recently noticed the symbolic and media potential of culture for gaining popularity, cannot make decisions about culture according to their short-term interests, while using the services of private cultural lobbyists.



**POLITICAL  
(ENGAGED) ART AND  
CENSORSHIP**

# IDEOLOGICAL WAYS OF WRITING. ANALYSIS OF IDEOLOGICAL TEXTS ON OFFICIAL SLOVAK VISUAL ART OF THE 1950s AND 1970s<sup>1</sup>

(SHORTENED)

In an article whose title paraphrases one of the chapter headings in Roland Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero*,<sup>2</sup> I focused on analysis and comparison of ideological texts from the 1950s and 1970s. My aim was to show their linguistic, stylistic and rhetorical characteristics, which were fundamentally influenced by the political context of the time. Barthes, in the book referred to, analyses a wide range of political modes of writing, from the revolutionary writing generated by the French revolution, through Marxist writing, to Stalinist writing. He states that "...each regime has its own writing, no history of which has yet been written. Since writing is the spectacular commitment of language, it contains at one and the same time, thanks to valuable ambiguity, the reality and the appearance of power, what it is, and what it would like to be thought to be: a history of political modes of writing would therefore be the best of social phenomenologies."<sup>3</sup> This text appeared over half a century ago, in 1953, and our culture and art have been marked since then not only by the liberal 1960s, but by the renewed imposition of communist dictatorship in the 1970s, and finally by the fall of the regime in 1989. Nevertheless, Barthes's challenge is still to find any very noteworthy echo in our milieu. The numerous exhibitions, catalogues and monographs produced in recent years, which examined various aspects of art in the second half of the 20th century, including the relationship of ideology and art,<sup>4</sup> have provided many stimulating analyses of the age and its artworks. In these

1 This text was delivered as a lecture at the Section for Research and Scholarship at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in 2005. It was part of the completion of the research task "Slovak Visual Art 1949 – 1989 as Seen in Contemporary Literature", which aimed to identify, analyse and artistically evaluate authentic contemporary texts about domestic art during the specified period. A modified text of the lecture was published in the Czech journal *Ateliér* (fortnightly publication on contemporary visual art) 2006, no. 2, and no. 3. We are publishing an abridged version of the text.

2 The chapter in question is entitled "Political Modes of Writing".

3 Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 25.

4 See exhibitions such as: *Umenie socialistického realizmu na Slovensku 1948 - 1963* (The Art of Socialist Realism in Slovakia 1948 - 1963). GMB, Mirbachov palác, 2003, curator Ivan Jančár; *Hrdina. Súmrak romantickej kategórie* (The Hero. Twilight of a Romantic Category). SNG, Zvolenský zámok, 2005, curators Beata Jablonská and Alexandra Kusá. Catalogue of

explorations, authentic contemporary texts have usually been presented as important written sources illustrating the artistic and socio-political context of the age. Far more rarely does one find the text itself subjected to analysis, or at least the sociolect or idiolect of specific texts and authors.<sup>5</sup> When comparing the artworks created in the second half of the 20th century with the texts that introduced them to contemporary discourse, or in other ways framed and contextualised them, it is evident that writing, in contrast to the autonomy of the artworks themselves, is less resistant to the corrosion caused by the flow of time. While the art that served the ideology of the 1950s and 1970s repeatedly evokes interest among professionals and indeed some admiration among the lay public, texts contaminated by politics and ideology do not spontaneously attract such attention, and in a certain sense they are regarded as dead texts. But here also, we have the opportunity of a new mode of reading, if we focus on the ambiguity of the political mode of writing as identified by Barthes. Paradoxically, we may be helped in doing so by shifting the accent from content to form, so that we will not merely analyse what these texts were about, but also how they were written.

In the article, I have focused on researching two categories of ideological texts, with the aim of showing the characteristic features (influenced by the political context of the time) of their language, style and rhetoric. Given that this approach is without precedent in Slovak art-historical literature, I have taken as a starting point a stimulating work by Norbert Adamov, *Ideové aspekty hodnotenia slovenskej hudobnej tvorby v období socialistického realizmu* (Intellectual Aspects of the Evaluation of Slovak Art Music during the Period of Socialist Realism), published in 2002.<sup>6</sup> Adamov's article includes references to further relevant literature, in particular an article by Vladimír Karbusický *Ornament revoluce* (Ornament of the Revolution), which appeared in the journal *Svědectví* in 1972.<sup>7</sup> Despite my intention of working principally on the plane of analysis of language, the interdependence of form and content in the works studied necessarily led me to partial interpretations, where I relied above all on Umberto Eco.<sup>8</sup>

### Model Ideological Texts of the 1950s

The attributes of ideological writing of the 1950s may be found in concentrated form in an article entitled *On Basic Questions of the Struggle for Socialist Realism in Visual Art* (1952), written for the party fortnightly *Pod zástavou socializmu*.<sup>9</sup> We may regard this piece as a textbook example of writing contaminated with the party ideology of the 1950, or indeed as a methodological handbook which could induce potential writers step by step towards constructing a model text that was fully subordinated to ideology.

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exhibitions: Zora Rusinová, ed., *Dejiny slovenského výtvarného umenia - 20. Storočie* (Bratislava SNG, 2000); Aurel Hrabušický, ed., *Slovenské vizuálne umenie 1970-1985* (Bratislava: SNG, 2003). On the Czechoslovak context see Tereza Petišková, *Československý socialistický realizmus 1948-1958* (Praha: Galeria Rudolfinum, 2002).

- 5 See Marian Zervan, "Gramatika úvah o človeku. Gramatiky filozofických, estetických a výtvarno-teoretických dialektov, sociolektov a idiolektov 60. Rokov" in *Šesťdesiate roky v slovenskom výtvarnom umení*, ed. Zora Rusinová (Bratislava: SNG, 1995), 28.
- 6 Norbert Adamov, "Ideologické aspekty hodnotenia slovenskej hudobnej tvorby v období socialistického realizmu," in *Príspevky k analýze hudobného vedomia na Slovensku*, ed. Juraj Lexmann (Bratislava: ÚHV SAV, 2002), 137-50.
- 7 Vladimír Karbusický, "Ornament revoluce," *Svědectví* 11, no. 44 (1972): 589.
- 8 I have mainly relied on the article Umberto Eco, "Overinterpreting texts," in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 45-66.
- 9 Radislav Matuščík, "K základným otázkam boja za socialistický realizmus vo výtvarnom umení," *Pod zástavou socializmu* 1, no. 5 (1952): 179-84.

At the IX. Congress Comrade Kopecký, speaking about the struggle against formalism, said: "In the field of verbal and other art, our fundamental Marxist-Leninist line means this above all, that we are wiping out and attempting to completely eradicate formalism... We condemn art that avoids reality and truth and, affecting neutrality, runs away from taking a position in the problems of life, the problems of the class struggle etc. We condemn art that draws back in revulsion from everything that the people live by." (...) Today it is clear to all visual artists that the struggle against formalism is not a struggle against the formal perfection of the work. But there is another incorrect opinion that still persists, which has its source in a formalist conception of the form of the artwork, in a non-comprehension of the dialectical unity of content and form. It is the opinion that the new content is compatible with the old form, that it is not necessary uncompromisingly to abandon all of the so-called achievements of formalism...

If we look at this text in terms of how it establishes (or maintains and reproduces) a certain ideological stereotype, some of its typical features come to the forefront. Above all, there is a certain closedness of form, which according to Barthes derives from a "lexicon as specialized and as functional as a technical vocabulary; even metaphors are here severely codified."<sup>10</sup> We may conditionally apply Barthes's characterisation of the Marxist mode of writing to the texts we are analysing. There is a selection of keywords (in this case **formalism**); we could, however, describe them rather as tribal shibboleths<sup>11</sup> that are fully subordinate to the pragmatic purpose of the text. In contrast to Barthes's interpretation of Marxist writing, which evokes an emotionally scaled-down vocabulary, typically the ideological texts of the 1950s are expressed forcefully: **to eradicate formalism, struggle against formalism, uncompromisingly abandon all of the so-called achievements of formalism**. This change of vocabulary corresponds to the changed function of the texts. In contrast to the explicative writing of the creators of Marxism-Leninism, here the language is adapted to the elementary educational function of the texts. Their aim was not an interpretation of Marxist-Leninist teaching, but rather the education and above all re-education of artists. Understanding of ideas was not expected from them, only a blind faith in dogmas. Associated with this feature of contemporary writing was the composition of the text, where a large space was reserved for citations from ideological authorities, which often appeared directly in the introduction. This place of honour was assigned by the author in the present instance to Václav Kopecký, one of the principal creators of communist cultural policy in the 1950s. In the Czechoslovak context such revered authorities also included Zdeněk Nejedlý,<sup>12</sup> a musicologist and communist politician, and Ladislav Štoll, an upholder of dogmatic Marxism; and most cited of all, of course, were the founders of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, not only Lenin, Marx and Engels, but also Stalin. References to the texts of ideological authorities did not merely have the standard function of citations, because in the context of contemporary ideology these texts were regarded as something more, namely as revelations of the one infallible truth. In this sense, the virtue of sacred texts was attributed to them, and their presence, or the frequency of their appearance, reinforced the relevance of the given writer and his testimony. Formulations connected with the projection of a new society, whose emergence was described in contemporary literature not only as a struggle of the new with the old, but also as "the higher and more perfect rising above the backward and dying", were the antithesis to formalism, meaning "the rottenness of

<sup>10</sup> Barthes, 22-23.

<sup>11</sup> Adamov, 138.

<sup>12</sup> Symptomatic is an article: Miloš Tomčík, "K niektorým otázkam slovenského výtvarného umenia zo stanoviska prác Zdenka Nejedlého," *Výtvarné umění*, no. 3 (1953): 241-47.



the old form.”<sup>13</sup> Very much frequented were tribal shibboleths that played variations on the healthy core of art, or steadfast effort for a new artistic expression.

The above-mentioned features of ideological writing are manifested to a far greater degree in the passages of texts which relate to the description of specific artworks.

At the Spring members' exhibition... Comrade Guderna exhibited, among other things, his canvas entitled *From an Army Culture Room*. This work may be characterised as a failure of his honest effort at a new artistic expression. This picture is unquestionably a correctly thought-out painting in terms of theme and idea; one can distinguish it by its new relation to the depicted reality. However, the content is fashioned with non-realistic expressive means, over-simplifying how things really are shaped; it is incapable of expressing the spiritual states and life of soldiers, what characterises them inwardly. The entire work is proof of the tragedy... of combining the old form with new content. What is clearly shown here is the rottenness of the old form, in whose shackles the artist is never able to utter and to sing the full idea of his work.<sup>14</sup>

The final sentence, above all, of that quotation exemplifies several features of the ideological text in cumulation:

- metaphorically charged expression: “rottenness of the old form, in whose shackles”
- a pathos-filled expression, with an amassing and gradation of words of the same meaning (pleonasm): “the artist is never able to utter and to sing the full idea of his work”.

If we transpose this idea to a spare, more economical version, in other words removing the stylistic and rhetorical figures referred to and replacing them with neutral expressions, we get a sentence that is less appellative (indeed, in a way, a standard sentence): “Manifested here is the influence of the old form, which the artist cannot employ to express the idea of his work.” It follows from the analysis that the ideological mode of writing is not only bound up with a lexicon (a certain type of vocabulary) but also, or above all, with an expressive pathos and suggestive force. Ideological writing without the above-mentioned rhetorical figures would simply be ineffective.

Another example of the contemporary evaluation of the artwork is a contribution by the painter Ľudovít Kudlák, which he delivered at an artists' activist meeting in 1950.<sup>15</sup> In the preceding text an example was used of a painting that fulfilled the criteria of socialist content, and the reviewer directed his polemic only at its formal side; Kudlák by contrast expressed himself about the artist, who was on a list of the public enemies of socialism:

Regarding Sokol's influence on our graphic artists, we can say the essential briefly. His drawings are social sentiments, saturated with a profound pessimism. We reject his beings with their air of idiocy. Everywhere Sokol sees only downfall, ruins and monsters. His paintings entitled *The Deluge*, *A New Law*, *Kaddish*, *Wife-beating*, are intoxicating ideograms, individual sensations of a man who is full of mystic beings and powers. All that is remote from us today.

In the sense of Eco's thoughts about over-interpretation, we could regard Kudlák's view of Sokol as a paranoid interpretation. This context may be further clarified by

13 Mikuláš Bakoš, *O socialistickom realizme* (Bratislava: Štátne nakladateľstvo, 1952), 4.

14 Matuščík, 179-84.

15 Lecture by painter Ľudovít Kudlák at a meeting of Slovak artists – communists on May 18, 1952. See Ľudovít Kudlák, “Diskusný príspevok na aktívne výtvarníkov,” *Výtvarné umění* 2 (1951-1952): 163-65.

comparison with another ideological text which appeared under the title “Formalist Art in the Service of the Warmongers” in the journal *Výtvarné umění* in the early 1950s.<sup>16</sup>

These works manifest a tendency to celebrate everything that degrades and beats down man, human dignity, beauty, and moral values of any kind. Man as a biological unit – a tangle of bones, tendons, arteries and glands – such is the image of human beings in the contemporary decadent visual art of the USA. The image of a ruined human being, sadistic instincts discharging themselves in the worst perversity: is this not a moral preparation for the tasks which are being prepared for the average American by his government, the millionaires and the generals? A human being who can look at such pictures without disgust and revulsion is perfectly capable of murdering Korean women and children, capable of scattering flies, mosquitos and fleas infected with cholera and plague.

If we simply continue paraphrasing Umberto Eco, we might say that the difference between normal interpretation and paranoid interpretation consists in an awareness that the relation between looking at decadent paintings and the capacity to murder is minimal (we may leave aside for the moment the question of whether the given paintings are decadent in reality). It is precisely the deduction of the possible maximum, hence the capacity to murder, from the minimal relationship between this brutal act and looking at paintings, which establishes the paranoid quality of this interpretation, characteristically found in the ideological texts of the 1950s.

It follows from the above that representatives of the new ideology were not prepared to tolerate artistic diversity. One of the priorities was the rejection of formalism, which was associated with artistic modernism and the Avant-garde. Interestingly, the people who became leaders of this process in Slovakia were artists themselves, who had assumed the role of ideologues. Ladislav Čemický and Štefan Bednár, in a contribution to the essay collection *Slovak Visual Art on the Road to Socialist Realism*,<sup>17</sup> were the first who attempted, as early as 1950, to analyse the “crystallisation process” that ensued in Slovak art after the 1st Congress. Based on an evaluation of artistic production, and above all on the attitude of artists to the new political reality, they established three typological groups of artists.

To the first group they assigned the so-called bourgeois realists, whom they designated as conjuncturalists. They accused them in particular of adapting only to the external form of socialist realism, “without changing and adapting their art to today’s reality.”<sup>18</sup>

The second group were the so-called formalists, who had not managed to renounce their previous work. The attitude towards these artists was uncompromising. Compared to art critics, the authors used much sharper formulations, which indicated a possible existential threat to non-conforming artists: “Only in occasional cases, a wretched remnant of them could not be enlightened and convinced by the irrefutable theories of Marxist-Leninist aesthetics. In such cases it is evident that what conceals itself behind their stubborn struggle for a formalist aesthetic is their own creative impotence, inadequate professional schooling, the disease of decadence... Here there is no more to be discovered, here an enemy is plain to be seen...”<sup>19</sup>

16 Jaroslav Bouček, “Formalistické ‘umění’ ve službách válečných paličů,” *Výtvarné umění* 2, no. 7-8 (1951-1952): 343-45.

17 Štefan Bednár and Ladislav Čemický, “Súčasný slovenský výtvarný umenie” in *Slovenské výtvarné umenie na ceste k socialistickému realizmu*, ed. Ladislav Čemický Štefan Bednár (Bratislava: Tvar, 1950), 60.

18 Ibid., 61.

19 Ibid., 82-83.

To the third, the most numerous and most promising group Čemický and Bednár assigned those previous formalists and realists “who are gradually coming to terms with today’s reality... They have recognised in themselves that an acceleration of this process, both in society and in the individual, can be achieved only by struggle, sometimes even against oneself and one’s previous ideas. Precisely this contradiction, and the struggle against it, helps them to transform themselves.”<sup>20</sup>

### Model Normalising Texts of the 1970s

The second group of texts I will analyse comes from the early 1970s and the onset of so-called normalisation. Comparing this period with the 1950s, reference is made to the evaporation of the ideology of Marxist-Leninism<sup>21</sup> and “evaporation of the dogma of socialist realism”, which became “a kind of comedy”.<sup>22</sup> Likewise it is said that: “In contrast to the Stalinist model, the political power now did not seek to impose its model using terror, but rather by means of so-called ties of material interest”.<sup>23</sup> For my own interpretation I have chosen texts that in a certain way escape this evaluation, because they emerged in a period of the change of paradigm and served as one of the instruments of power in a renewed imposition of the doctrine of socialist realism and a reinforcement of the totalitarian regime.

We wish to express the objective truth especially about the crisis years 1968-69, which has left its unhappy imprints even on the life of our Union. We wish to point to causes and circumstances which preceded this period, and openly and uncompromisingly to name the representatives of destructive tendencies, who consciously disorientated the artistic community and attempted to shunt our developing art away from socialist realism, onto the blind siding of formalist art. And these were not only prominent theoreticians and critics but also many artists, who betrayed the art programme of socialist realism and became criers of bourgeois aesthetics. The intellectual struggle with them was not easy or simple. With the lapse of time, however, for the sake of a just assessment, one must take a differentiated attitude to individuals, according to the measure of their guilt. Those who made mistakes and were led astray must be given a chance to expiate their faults and errors. The artist may err, but he must not lie. And we also had among us those who lied and hid their anti-socialist involvement under an affectation of being apolitical, and even those who in the critical years agitated against the Communist Party, who devised the most varied resolutions against the leading role of the Communist Party and against alliance with the Soviet Union, who slandered honest communist artists and purposefully set about breaking the unity of the Union.

The above text appeared as “A Report on the Activity of the Union of Slovak Visual Artists” in the publication *For Socialist Art* (1974).<sup>24</sup> Besides an analysis of development from the late 1950s to 1968 from the standpoint of defending socialist realism and the principles of Marxist realism, it included passages directly attacking specific artists and theoreticians who were actively engaged in the renewal process of the 1960s. In the interpretation of the Union’s functionaries, they were designated as **bearers of destructive tendencies and traitors**. While the text makes reference to errors and faults, much stronger expressions are also used to describe the activity of those criticised. Mention is made of **lies, agitation and slander**, while settling

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>21</sup> Adamov, 138.

<sup>22</sup> Mária Orišková, *Dvojhlásné dejiny umenia* (Bratislava: Petrus, 2002), 26.

<sup>23</sup> Ján Bakoš, *Umelec v kľietke* (Bratislava: SCCAN, 1999), 158.

<sup>24</sup> Ludmila Rampáková, ed., *Za socialistické umenie. Materiály zo zjazdov umeleckých zväzov (máj - november 1972)* (Bratislava: Slovenský spisovateľ, 1974), 219-57.

accounts with the bearers of these destructive tendencies is unambiguously declared as a struggle of ideas. These expressive resources of text and style are reminiscent of the ideological harangues of the 1950s, and not just formally. The threats adverted to in the text were soon manifested in specific steps taken against the artists and critics indicated in the text, namely exclusion from the Union, loss of employment, prohibition of exhibition and publication, interrogation by the State Security, and restriction of personal freedom, for example by depriving people of passports, etc.

Symptomatic of this type of text is a passage where the first-person plural is repeatedly used – “We wish to express, we wish to point out”, with the pronoun we, though tacitly in this instance, representing collective power, at the head of which was the Communist Party. In an article from 1977, Jozef Mistrík interpreted this rhetorical figure in appropriate fashion: “Language proceeds from us and returns to us; it is a manifestation of ourselves.”<sup>25</sup>

During this period, we frequently encounter the use of similar language strategies. An illustrative example is the address at an exhibition opening by Pavol Koyš, deputy minister for culture of the Slovak Socialist Republic, delivered at the opening of the first exhibition of activist art. The appellative quality of this text is emphasised by the first-person-plural writing, with repeated formulations of the type “We citizens of this country... We, whose concern is the socialist present... We communists make no secret of the fact that...”<sup>26</sup> To the primary function of this text and others like it, we might add secondary functions which are connected not with the open repressive force of the totalitarian regime but rather with refined strategies of indirect pressure: the despatch of warning signals to potential critics of the system. Finally, what is the position of the individual excluded from the powerful collective, and what options do they have? Associated with these issues is the phenomenon of ‘positive deviancy’, which even before the fall of the regime was analysed by Soňa Szomolányiová in the weekly journal *Literary Týždenník* in an article entitled “Je sociálna zmena mimo nás?” (Is Social Change Outside of Us?) As one of the first, together with Martin Bútora<sup>27</sup>, she publicly referred to groups of people who behaved according to the principle of “opposing the ‘bad’ rules of the game”, which were still practised by the Communist Party in Slovakia in the late 1980s. We may use a quotation from this pre-November text by Szomolányiová, as a corrective in some measure to the oversimplified statements about “an evaporation of the ideology of Marxism-Leninism”, or to the conception of ideological rhetoric as decoration: “Today the positive deviants among us are not threatened by the sanction that befell Socrates or Piatnický (who paid with his life for resisting Stalin in the case of Bukharin), but that does not mean that by calling the prevailing normality into question they do not run a certain risk. Even today, sanctions of various kinds are applied, at the very least the loss of official recognition. Therefore, an act of positive deviation demands of its agent a measure of courage or scholarly non-conformism, and civic and moral strength...”<sup>28</sup>

25 Jozef Mistrík, “Paralely povstaleckej a budovateľskej reči,” in *Slovenské národné povstanie v histórii a kultúre Slovenska*, ed. Samuel Cambel (Bratislava: SPN, 1977), 209.

26 Pavol Koyš, “K prvej bilancii angažovanej tvorby,” *Výtvarný život* 17, no. 9 (1972): 1.

27 Martin Bútora, “Pozitívni devianti alebo odklinanie stigmatizovaných,” *Slovenské pohľady*, no. 12 (1989): 112–18.

28 Soňa Szomolányiová, “Je sociálna zmena mimo nás?,” *Literárny týždenník*, no. 11 (1989): 10.

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# IS YOUR MIND FILLED WITH GOODNESS?<sup>1</sup>

(SHORTENED)

Oscar Wilde believed that bad art stemmed from good intentions. This is, I dare say, not always the case; also, while we're at it, good art is not necessarily a product of bad intentions.

The tradition of neutral and pure aestheticism cherished by Wilde, himself a victim to very unnatural sexual politics, I shall juxtapose with the reflection on culture's ethical obligations, which has found its fullest expression so far in Susan Sontag's 2003 essay on photography "Regarding the Pain of Others." The revolutionary spirit of the Sixties, the combination of politics, aesthetics, and ethics I can very much relate to, still lingers in Sontag's thought. A spirit many today would want to rebuff under the pretence of its being an ideology, and yet it has never stopped being acutely topical and authentic.

Susan Sontag belonged to a generation of intellectuals who believed in the ethical duty to speak against violence and disregard for human autonomy, freedom, dignity and rights. While thinking about other people's suffering constitutes a revolutionary act of openness, looking at somebody else's ordeal must be combined with consideration. Images are important, but insufficient. Taking its point of departure in photojournalism and war photography, "Regarding the Pain of Others" offers a model ethical approach to visual representation. Such return to secular humanist and humanitarian thought is much needed today in the United States and in Poland.

It is from the perspective of ethical values related to human rights that I shall discuss some issues regarding contemporary Polish art.

As I am writing this text, I am well aware of the fact that art is only a marginal manifestation of broader visual culture. In 2005, photos of the year in Poland failed to include professional photo essays or art photography, but featured depictions of the "war of daily life," our very own Abu Ghraib. Images of nurses from a hospital in Silesia posing with premature infants they had taken out from incubators. One of the babies died later on. Every now and then, extracts from films made by students

<sup>1</sup> The text was originally published in Paweł Leszkowicz, "Czy twój umysł jest pełen dobroci?," *Obieg*, 18.07.2006, <https://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/teksty/5766>, accessed 7.09.2023.



degrading teachers in classrooms, or taking it out on other students or homeless people, are aired on television; they all share a prominent element of beating and sexual humiliation. Capturing those actions on film seems crucial: such acts of dehumanisation, always with some degree of enjoyment on the part of those coming to them, are pointless without visual record. Pictorial repetition, preferably on the Internet, makes them even more entertaining, goods for exchange.

In a fairly dramatic way, such occurrences raise the question about the connection between visuality and ethics. With its timeworn myths of freedom, contemporary Polish art has no choice, but to confront it.

Bad reception and a barrage of criticism from right-wing politicians and journalists – that contemporary artworks produced with the intention to provoke – have so far met with in Poland show how erroneously the sphere of values is understood here. By halting deeper reflection, the League of Polish Families has harmed contemporary art and the criticism of it in many ways. It is hard to properly concentrate on art when one has to protect it against fundamentalists and carry on writing about it from an appropriate perspective.

Our new “democratic” censorship is targeted at works which disrupt symbolic systems: religious-catholic, sexual-heteronormative, or economic-corporational. Values are equated with adherence to symbolic convention. The protection of symbols, usually religious symbols, and not of human beings, is a false point of reference. (Unless the human is personified by the pope or president).

I reject these typical symbolic categories that tend to be used as a weapon against contemporary art in Poland to perform a critical analysis of selected works from an ethical point of view.

My exploration is not founded on a demand for censorship, nor has it been prompted by the elitist conception of art as a sanctuary for higher humanistic values from the brutality of media and political culture. I don't believe that art (culture) should be guided by one ideology. I don't think that art ought to safeguard human rights (or any other rights), it is free to problematise and investigate them – which is what the pieces discussed below do to some extent. It is therefore a good thing that they are accessible and popular, but it is nevertheless a shame that they have failed to encourage critical reflection, rather than eliciting passive acceptance or apologia.

It is an individual critical opinion that I am expressing here, exercising my right to freedom of thought, at no time urging that censorship should be imposed. It is also my intention to point out that a revaluation of the tradition of so-called critical art is happening. It is in crisis. Just as there is critical art, there is also critical history of art and its practitioners are not supposed to write eulogies. I wish to emphasise this to avoid my words being used against the artists whose names will appear below, as they are artists I think highly of. I want to draw attention to a certain issue. I have decided to speak of some big names in Polish art with a strong enough position at home and abroad. I believe that my opinion may be a valuable contribution to the multiplicity of interpretations of their work. By no means do I link these artists with any political party; for me, their work is a manifestation of a state of mind that is prevalent in a society shaped by the aforementioned systems. Also, I write about specific works, not about bodies of work.

I'm taking all this care to define my position to make sure I will not be accused of any relations to journalists or groups that could use my argument as a voice against contemporary art or freedom of expression. Should this happen, it would mean that it is still too soon to conduct such revision and that my intentions have been misunderstood.

Apart from Susan Sontag's text, I have been moved to perform a revision of Polish critical art from the perspective of ethics and human rights by an artwork of Artur Żmijewski. His video *80064* shows Józef Tarnawa, a former Auschwitz prisoner, having the number on his arm – 80064 – “renewed”, or re-tattooed at the artist's request. We watch the conversation Żmijewski is having with the man who has doubts as to the authenticity of a number revamped in this way. The artist keeps on insisting, and the old man eventually gives in. Żmijewski is revisiting the psychological mechanism of conformism and obedience which made prisoners adjust to inhumane conditions in concentration camps.<sup>2</sup>

What Żmijewski doesn't see is that his experiment is carried out at another person's expense, causing him pain and suffering.

The story of performance art, amongst others, should have taught him that somebody else's suffering is to be taken upon oneself, rather than re-inflicted. This could be the meaning of an ethical attitude in art.

The *80064* project was planned to be included in the exhibition *Auschwitz Prozess – Geschichte und Rezeption* (2004), staged on the fortieth anniversary of the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials. The Fritz Bauer Institute, the organiser of the show, rejected Żmijewski's work, recognising that something was not right with this study of Nazi history. Nonetheless, the artist prepared the video for his individual exhibition at the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Brétigny-sur-Orge, France.

The freedom of expression outweighed human rights.

For me, the video represents the psychological mechanism of conformism and obedience which has led to a situation where we live in a society governed by political and media elites who question the importance of human rights. Żmijewski followed the western trend of making Holocaust-related art, and produced a piece that robbed an old man of his dignity. No symbolic convention of representation was flouted, affected were only the rights of a specific individual. But he was neither a pope nor a president, so – no problem.

It is for this reason that I called Artur Żmijewski the first artist of the Fourth Republic – not only because of his high position within the art establishment, but because of the expression of dehumanisation that we experience in various aspects of our lives. In this work, I notice an attitude, possibly unintentional, but not uncommon in Poland with its far-right government, that is unencumbered by sensitivity to human rights and, chiefly, to individual suffering of the weak, of those who are members of the majority. Old age is one of the reasons for exclusion. Neglect and denial are always imposed from a position of strength. In this case, it is a well-known artist who is in power.

It is in this sense that art is a psychosocial symptom.

A revolutionary turn is taking place here. Critical artists who were once themselves excluded are currently moving to dominant positions and repeating old mechanisms of violence. There is a small distance between criticising power and being fascinated by it.

In her book *Ciało i władza* [Body and Power], written in the stormy Nineties, Iza Kowalczyk discovered a humanistic potential in representations of an excluded and nonnormative body in contemporary Polish art. That was probably only one side of the coin. There was a parallel trend of antihumanism and nihilism in this art right from the beginning, and it is high time we acknowledged this fact. Antihumanism signalled the crisis of democracy in Poland, which has become embedded in the consciousness of all citizens.

2 Artur Żmijewski, *If it happened only once it's as if it never happened / Co stało się raz, nie stało się nigdy* (Warszawa: Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, 2005), 24.

*Bathhouse* (1997) and *Men's Bathhouse* (1999), Katarzyna Kozyra's two outstanding and pivotal artworks are an absolute ethicist's nightmare. We own our bodies everywhere and always. By filming naked people without their consent, with a covert camera, the artist flouted their right to self-ownership and bodily integrity. It is a totalitarian and unlawful power exercised by the artist over the bodies of other people. The two *Bathhouse* pieces have never been exhibited in Hungary, lest they should end up in court together with their creator.

Kozyra's indifference to other people's rights is understandable, considering the trauma of bodily instrumentalization that she went through at health facilities during chemotherapy. As a consequence, she was able to turn ethical transgression into eminent works of art. Internal experience and the pain of dehumanisation elevated *Bathhouse* to a higher level.

The fact that the artist has no direct knowledge of what he is speaking of makes Żmijewski's *80064* an artwork of a dubious nature. Judgement on people who have been imprisoned in concentration camps and their conformism there cannot be passed by someone who hasn't been a prisoner. It would be more constructive if the artist investigated his own conformism within the context of contemporary Polish culture of contempt.

The moral nihilism of Żmijewski's latest films, the ethical ambivalence of Katarzyna Kozyra's *Bathhouses* and the fact that works of this kind represented Poland at the Venice Biennial are crucial for the social history of art after 1989: they indicate the collapsing of the social contract. But rather than exceptional individuals with heightened sensitivity to such processes, the artists here are ordinary citizens giving expression to their own entanglement and confusion. Making use of artistic freedom, they act in a way that is consistent with the rules operating within a society whose social contract has been destabilised.

That is, my freedom and my rights are in conflict with your freedom and your rights.

In short, the theory of the social contract in democracy assumes that individuals enter into a contract with the state to have their basic rights protected, and the system is supposed to do that. Recognition of these shared rights acts as a defence mechanism against illegal egotistic interests. In order to avoid ongoing conflict, we gain civil rights provided that we respect other people's rights and give up part of our liberty. The remaining part of our freedom is safeguarded by the state.

I suggest that we adopt this idealistic, but also profound concept as the reference point in our examination of art and Poland. From the dawn of Polish democracy, there was a sense of upset balance, and people were aware of the fact that they lived in a highly unequal society. One where everyone was against everyone, and the state was against all. From early on, one ideologized religion put its interest first without the state doing anything to protect citizens against such abuse. Capitalism didn't arrive without inequalities, either. A real milestone was set by the 1993 Abortion Act by which women, or half the population, were denied the right to bodily integrity, marking the collapse of the social contract. The unimaginable happened. All hell broke loose. We found ourselves back in a world of violence, the protection of citizens expected from a democratic state disappeared, or it had never been established after the Polish People's Republic.

That was when artists began appropriating, brutally and unscrupulously, bodies of other people as seen in naturist body art of which *Bathhouses* are prime examples.

When, following the breach of social contract in the early days of democratic transformations, the extreme right – openly negating minority rights and social equality for all – came to power in 2005, ethical norms ceased to matter.

By this time, Artur Żmijewski with his nihilistic art, was enjoying the status as a star.

This used to be known as the sign of the times.

That's not to say the artist has affiliations with the Law and Justice Party; that is to say that the ethical crisis resulting from the broken social contract has fully pervaded contemporary art. It is linked with the cynical, ironic, ambivalent and negative approach to human rights. Exactly the kind of approach that has been adopted by the political establishment and their media, replacing the individual with group or national identity.

Of course, the art of ethical nihilism isn't a solely Polish phenomenon. It is a full-blown trend in art, with its own artists, exhibitions, theorists and history. Some call it "bad art," and it surely deserves a separate analysis. What I want to point out here is that ethical nihilism is something different in advanced democracies such as the United Kingdom or Germany, than it is in the fundamentalist state of Poland. Art is global to the same extent as it is contextual. The problem with moral nihilism in the Fourth Republic boils down to its being in too close proximity to so-called moral revolution.

The eloquence of Kozyra's *Bathhouses* and, predominantly, Żmijewski's latest works comes from their crossing the border between art and life. But it is not the artists themselves that cross this border, it is the rights of other people they sacrifice; the problem of secular ethics which Polish art criticism has heretofore repressed is thus brought to light.

The term "critical art" was introduced to Polish art history by Krzysztof Wodiczko, who has always remained absolutely true in his writings and artistic practice to the moral ideal. It has been wrongly attributed to artworks with little relation to Wodiczko's openly committed attitude and his creative output clearly directed against injustice and exclusion. Apart from Kozyra's two eminent photographic pieces, *Blood Ties* and *Krzysztof Czerwiński*, works of Polish critical art tend to be too inconclusive, ambivalent, abstract, and in need of explanation, but first of all ethically indifferent. This is a very different kind of art; it needs a different label. A local version of body art, perhaps? This needn't be a worse kind of art. For example, similar tendencies in Lithuanian art of the 1990s are referred to as the art of trauma. This seems a more appropriate term. A society with a broken social contract is in fact a society of trauma and contempt.

One of art's goals is to challenge established values and norms and to experiment. This much is obvious. Artistic freedom is a well-known mantra. However, artistic freedom is just another word for the freedom of speech which we all have the right to, not only artists. An artist doesn't enjoy any exceptional kind of freedom, what he or she has is a medium of expression. The freedom of speech that art makes use of constitutes one of the basic values in human rights culture. What kind of approach should we adopt towards an art that negates or questions human rights, an art that chooses to follow a path of ethical negation?

I believe that artists shouldn't transgress human rights as they provide the foundation for their own rights within a democratic society as well. If they do so anyway, they don't represent – here in Poland – an alternative, avant-garde, experiment or critique of the system, but its passive component. The right thing to do then is to shed the illusion of innocence and independence.

Resistance to political censorship is as important as reflection on artistic nihilism and dehumanisation. These are the two sides of the same system and broken social contract.

It is definitely not my intention to apply ethical categories to art in a way that is too rigid, but they are especially crucial wherever art is interconnected with life, wherever the performative element is there, wherever its production causes somebody else's suffering.

An attitude can be currently observed in Polish art which was described by Sontag as cynical and ironic devaluation of representations of pain, a well-known phenomenon in mass culture. This is a strategy of ambivalent meanings which, nevertheless, becomes problematic when certain humanitarian values are at stake. Even though it is funny and exciting?

Significantly, this anti-humanitarian trend seems to have drawn another major exponent of Polish 'apparently critical' art. Sontag's observations regarding war photography provide a particularly good point of reference here. In a series of photographs called *Positives* (2002-3), Zbigniew Libera stages "positive" versions of famous photographic depictions of tragic historical events. The scenes are re-enacted by actors, only this time they take an "optimistic" or mocking turn imagined by the artist. The most dubious shot in this series is *Nepal*, referencing Huynh Cong Ut's iconic and shocking picture of a girl burned by a napalm bomb, fleeing from a Vietnamese village. In Libera's work, a naked young woman imitates the motions of the Vietnamese child as she is dissolving into laughter. She is running in a group of laughing children and parachutists. A topical commentary on a historical event and its record, Libera's photograph turns tragedy into absurd as well.

In terms of public relations, Libera and Żmijewski uncover the mechanisms of popular culture and address the problem of traumatic images stored in memory. But an ethical attitude which – according to Sontag – must accompany depictions of human suffering is not to be found in this art; the constant presence of such pictures in mass media doesn't always lead to their transition to banality, and they are never to be used as comic material. This may happen in the eye and sensitivity of the beholder.

Paradoxically, Żmijewski and Libera's works are manifestations of the same Polish visual culture that mixes photos of genocide, victims of famine and aborted foetuses within the anti-abortion exhibition *Wybierz życie* [Choose Life]<sup>3</sup>, while the opening titles of *Babilon.pl*, a documentary on Polish soldiers in Iraq produced by state television, are accompanied by a lowbrow song about Ali Baba.<sup>4</sup> A confusion of representations and values, this culture has arisen as a consequence of human rights not being internalised and institutionalised, while being instead incessantly defied and ridiculed for political or religious purposes. Without being aware of this or stepping back, the artists produce pieces reflecting the spirit of an era of dehumanisation and denial of human rights.

Supposed to be an outcome of the freedom and ambiguity that characterise art, such indifference can bring about most bizarre effects. We read in the leaflet accompanying Rafał Bujnowski's 2006 show *Bieżące prace* that the painter offered to

3 The anti-abortion exhibition *Wybierz życie* was displayed in the streets of Łódź, Białystok and Lublin in 2005. Fourteen large-format boards contained photos of massacred foetuses, victims of genocide and famine and animals used in experiments. MPs representing the League of Polish Families also tried to put on this peculiar show of images of suffering in Brussels.

4 *Babilon.pl* was a twelve-episode documentary series broadcast on Polish state television in 2003-4, allowing insight into the life of Polish soldiers serving in stabilisation forces in Iraq. The viewers could follow their daily routines and learn about life in Iraq. The portrayal of Iraqi people in the series was nothing short of humiliating.



paint placards for pride parades as well as for their adversaries. Bujnowski's alleged a-politicism made it possible for him to make placards for the Campaign Against Homophobia, the All-Polish Youth and the National Revival of Poland. It was all the same to him. "Real art" doesn't mind if it is of service to gays, feminists or fascists. After all, the official media have already informed us that there is no difference between them. Tellingly enough, the organisers of counter demonstrations and violent attacks were not interested (they don't think highly of contemporary artists), so Bujnowski only produced a number of placards and pictures bearing prodemocratic slogans turned by the dry painterly language into commonplaces. This is how art transforms highly energetic and meaningful contemporaneity into history, annihilating the spirit of revolt.

It is a shame that art (or anything else for that matter) isn't capable of converting words of hatred into history!

Ethical indifference has infected not only particular artists, but exhibiting institutions as well.

In January 2006, an exhibition of Tibetan art and crafts from Chinese collections was opened by the Ambassador of China acting as its patron at the Archaeological Museum in Kraków. It is common practice of Chinese authorities to use such events to legitimise their appropriation of Tibetan works of art and to come across in the four corners of the earth as patrons of culture. The Polish Museum didn't seem to mind being a pawn in this ideological game and provided no information explaining Chinese occupation of Tibet and the ensuing destruction of local culture and identity. That the communist Republic of China annexed Tibet is a fact acknowledged by popular culture on a global scale, but for the Kraków museum this was not an issue at all. The Polish Association of Friends of Tibet and the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights protested in vain, the director and curators dismissed their criticism of the exhibition as incitement, distanced themselves from politics, and rather tellingly claimed they were only interested in art.

In case of such an exhibition, diplomatic relations are obviously at work, but even so conformity should have its limits. A demand to respect human rights is not ideology-driven propaganda or expression of provisional political affiliation– it is a moral obligation!

There have been non totalitarian avant-garde, socially-orientated artistic movements in modern art: Surrealism, Dada and, most of all, the counterculture of the Sixties with its political conceptualism and performance of civil rights that could prove a major source of inspiration for the art world in today's Poland. They have never become antiquated. The kind of art that strives to reinstitute the social contract and ethical values can be found in Poland as well, even if it understandably remains a marginal, and perfectly genuine, alternative.

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# VISUAL ART IN THE PUBLIC SPACE OF “REAL CAPITALISM”<sup>1</sup>

## New Eternity?

In 2011, a twenty-year period of development of the young democracy was opened and the result of its cultural policy after 1989 was evaluated. Art in public space, pushed to the edge of the cultural spectrum, is unfortunately still not in good condition even after twenty years. The cause can be considered above all the loss of any concept in this area at the border of visual arts, architecture and urban planning. This happened mainly as a result of the demise of the so-called “4% law” in architecture, which stipulated that one to four percent of the total construction budget should be devoted to creative solutions. However, this construction law is not an invention of the dictatorship of the proletariat and should not be associated with it. Quite commonly, a similar regulation with a slightly lower percentage works, for example, in most large American cities.

While in the West the slogans “Free hand of the capital market” and “Maximum exploitation of area” have already fallen behind, here they have become a new mantra of our new capitalist establishment, and unfortunately also applied to urban planning. This crisis of art in public space is also rooted in public distrust of exterior sculpture as an ideological tool. Last, but not least, the lack of financial, but also ideological support for art in the public space, generally from the government and municipalities, is to blame. This is reflected in the overall social mood, when private space is preferred at the expense of public space (a symbol may be the transformation of a publicly accessible forest park into a private golf course). Our current representatives mostly understand culture as a difficult bloodline that only absorbs financial resources, without realizing that investments in culture bring more to society in the long term than, for example, heavy industry. And if we compare the last 20-year regime with the current 20-year one, even if only in the field of “art in the public space”, we regret to find that we have lost overwhelmingly. After the revolution in 1989, the situation changed significantly in such a way that art is not

1 The text was originally published in Pavel Karous, “Vizuální umění ve veřejném prostoru v ‘Reálném kapitalismu,’” *Vetřelci a volavky*, <http://www.vetrelciavolavky.cz/texty/vizualni-umeni-ve-verejnem-prostoru-v-realnem-kapitalismu>, accessed 7.09.2023.

subject to any ideologically controlled commission, but there is almost no public order, much less a selection competition. Therefore, without tenders, there are no professional commissioners (with or without an idea) who would promote contemporary art in the streets of our cities. If an artist wants to enter public space today, one has to resort either to illegal intervention, such as the artist working under the pseudonym Epos 257 with his “occupation of public space” on Palackého náměstí, or he has no choice but to obtain financial support from a private company, such as Jiří David at his moving *Key Statue*.

A rare exception is, for example, the activities of the company Spacium, which focuses on the enrichment, revitalization and cultivation of public urban spaces in Liberec, through the installation of new sculptures by contemporary artists (see the sculptural bus stop by David Černý). In a similar way, the current management of the Brno City Gallery, in cooperation with the Brno municipality, is taking a responsible approach to its city, organizing the event “Statues in the Streets.” This exhibition of art in public spaces aims to select suitable works for permanent installation as well.

On the other hand, the manner in which art objects are installed in public spaces in the metropolis of Prague is not a worthy example. The urban districts of Prague rarely muster the courage to launch a proper sculpture competition, but they are happy to accept a gift, so according to the folk wisdom “don’t look at the teeth of a gift horse”, the creations of below-average but productive figurative sculptors such as Lea Vivot or Anna Chromy are gradually infiltrating the capital.

Let us also recall the frequent installation of sculptures by members of a generation long past their creative zenith, such as Olbram Zoubek’s sculptures for the exterior of Komerční Banka in Spálená Street or the monument *For Second Resistance* by Vladimír Preclík in the prestigious area in Klárov from 2008 or the installation of the bronze monument of Taras Ševčenko on Náměstí Kinských. The controversial former mayor of Prague 5, Mr. Jančík, arbitrarily installed a social-realist and poorly modelled statue of the poet Taras Ševčenko, who had never been to the Czech Republic, just to gain the support of the Ukrainian lobby. Similar resentment among the professional public is caused by the planned patronage installation of a cheesy sculpture of Michael Jackson in a public park on the Letenská plain, which this time is supported by another politician with a bad reputation, Pavel Bém. Visitors to Prague can therefore look forward to a new tacky statue near the site of the former Stalin monument, this time perhaps with the inscription “with thanks from all the working people of Bohemia and Moravia to the Great Helmsman Pop and an expression of eternal loyalty to MTV culture.”

**ART IN  
PUBLIC SPACES**

# CONTACT. POLYPHONY. ANNUAL EXHIBITION OF THE SOROS CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS<sup>1</sup>

“Why don’t you deal with  
manager rats, for example?”  
(Miklós Sükösd)

In November, the Soros Foundation’s Center for Contemporary Arts organised its 1993 exhibition entitled *Polyphony – Social Commentary in Contemporary Hungarian Art*, the third one based on an open call. According to the original call for proposals, the board (Gábor Andrási, Krisztina Jerger, Katalin Néray, Gábor Pataki) was looking for works “which reflect on the changes which have been taking place in Hungary and the Central European region in the last few years as well as on the questions and conflicts raised by these changes and do this in the framework of a broadly defined competence of art. No genre restrictions apply.”

We believe it would have been difficult to find a more important topic to explore, since the now delineating outlines of the last few years reveal that hardly any contemporary art in Hungary reflects on the abundance of problems that have emerged with the change of regime, seeking and offering radical artistic responses. With the apolitical “new sensibility” gone, many have rightly hoped that a creative attitude analysing real social and existential issues would gain ground, and that the radical tradition marked in the previous era, by names such as Tibor Hajas and Miklós Erdély, would not be broken. Seminal impulses could be hoped for mainly from newcomers, self-taught artists and young people (in the late eighties, for example, from the Hejettes Szomlyazók and later the Újlak Group), while the members of the “great generation” of the sixties and seventies were (are) mostly busy with their own institutional success and the fulfilment of their oeuvre. Today, a special interest in social conditions is present more in the work of certain lesser known, isolated artists (see, for example, Kada’s various actions, most recently his public demonstration last winter entitled Butapest [Dumbapest]), or in the work of such pundits (Galántai, Szentjóby) who are put down – and perhaps written off – as “permanent avant-garde”, and not in a manner identifiable as a tendency.

So it was with anticipation and some scepticism that one anticipated the outcome of the call for proposals. In order to avoid the odium of possibly being a resurgence

<sup>1</sup> The text was originally published in Géza Boros, “Kontaktálás – Polifónia. A Soros Kortárs Művészeti Központ éves kiállítása,” *Balkon*, no. 1 (1994): 24–26. Translated by Dániel Sipos.

of some abstract and empty notion of “sociality”, or perhaps an interest in current political affairs, the board itself sought to inspire themes in the call for proposals. As they wrote: “The range of social and political themes which may serve as the content of the submitted works extends to – but is not restricted to – the following: the transformations of power, broadly defined – the revaluation of social roles, expectations, customs and systems of values: the tensions of collective belonging and dispersal; orientation in the new objective, ideological, emotional and temporal environment; transformations of sexual and gender relations; a mapping of geographical, social and institutional spaces (for movement); the adequacy or inadequacy of the cultural, linguistic and symbolic means available in this changed reality; a sense of responsibility for human and environmental resources; the problems of processing a private and shared past, present and future; and the social and public role of fine arts in answering challenges like the above.”

Whether this text was too alarming, or whether in fact so few artists are interested in such problems, it is impossible to say – but in any case, most of the twenty-nine proposals eventually realised were from the submissions of artists selected in a second round. Banished to the street in the meantime due to the aversions of the Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle’s new management, the exhibition had eventually evolved into a large-scale urban project. And as such, if it was haunted by the echoes of similar foreign precedents, such as the recent documenta in Kassel, perhaps its significance was precisely that it summarised the domestic aspirations mainly represented by young artists, realised in venues and spaces outside the traditional exhibition halls, which had emerged in the conceptually inspired art of the nineties, especially in the genre of installation.

The final event of the exhibition series was a symposium at the French Institute, where a number of speakers raised the lack of more radical and political works as a weakness.

Undoubtedly, the oppositional creative attitude once represented by the Inconnu Group, for example, is completely absent from today’s palette, but it would be a mistake to hold this against the very artists participating in the exhibition, who – with one or two exceptions – are predominantly young artists who, fortunately, have not had to fight their own artistic freedom fight. For this generation, the various state and foundation grants, invitations to exhibitions and study trips abroad are already a reality of course, and even if they objectively differ from their Western peers in terms of opportunities, they can (or do) experience their own art as a success-oriented, professional activity rather than as an opportunity for conflict. Understandably, in this context, the “socially sensitive” is not typically raised as a stylistic-ethical issue, but as one of many visual, medial or even philosophical problems. With the opening up of the possibility of direct political action and the emergence of a public sphere, “figurative speech”, the tolerated and banned layer of visual arts, which had played a significant role in the linguistic-cultural preparation of the political paradigm shift, has now lost its privileged role. Initiatives such as the Soros Foundation itself, which promotes the establishment of an open society, were created precisely to embrace, integrate and institutionalise these alternative values.

Besides the larger correlations, there is a consideration not to be dismissed, the point raised by Balázs Beöthy, one of the artists who logged in at the symposium by video-phone from Hamburg – namely, that “everyone got money for what they did, except the artists”, which ultimately reveals the invariably unsettled nature of the artist’s social status.

Another aspect that should not be ignored is that, in addition to its use as a medium, the “social context” has finally come to play an additional role – we know nothing about the reception of works, for example. The social adequacy of the project could have been reinforced, for example, if someone had organised a parallel counter-exhibition of the unaccepted (unrealisable, amateurish, not submitted) ideas, even with the benevolent, indirect support of the board.

One such rejected entry will eventually be included in the forthcoming catalogue – spruced up with essays – demonstrating the flexibility of organising. The proposal by Tamás St. Auby (Szentjőby) would have meant reducing the brightness of Budapest’s street lighting for 24 seconds on the opening night of the project, with the price of half of the energy saved allocated to support the Hungarian Federation of the Blind and Partially Sighted and the other half to cover the artists’ fees for the Polyphony exhibition. With his work entitled Beautiful Darkness, Szentjőby, who has been on an art strike for some time, intends to highlight the economic and legal unviability of visual artists in contemporary society.

Finally, let’s talk about something that has not been mentioned enough, either at the symposium or in this article: the works that have been realised. (Unfortunately, this year the Soros Foundation skipped out on its laudable habit of giving out prizes, so the author of these lines, as a quasi-social juror, is doing it for gratis now.)

The best works would include two works by János Sugár, his Graffiti-Saving Project, in which the artist intends to cast two ordinary graffiti on a Budapest street into bronze and return them to their original location (the project is still in progress due to the complicated procedure of requesting a permit), and the electronic billboard, which consisted in the insertion of a 50-second programme in the afternoons between advertisements on the giant electronic billboard in Blaha Lujza Square with slogans such as “Work for nothing or at least do works that you would do anyway for nothing”, “What’s happened? The machine writes out my thoughts!”, etc.

Like Sugár, Pál Gerber chose a mass culturally saturated medium as his message carrier: thanks to his work consisting of a sentence on the side of a public transport bus, a BKV bus on line number 4 was running in November with the sign MY DAY IS RUINED IF I DON’T VANQUISH THREE EVILS on its side. In another work, he used the automatic stamping machine of the Mail-sorting Division the Hungarian Post, Post Office’s to print three of his emblematic text graphics and send them to anonymous recipients. “It was essential for me,” he writes, “that appearance on postal mail both ensures indiscriminate publicity and anonymity, while actively channelling the office into the process, thus socialising the creative act.”

Another noteworthy work is the installation by János Szirtes, who set up two fire extinguisher nozzles with intersecting radii down at the lower embankment on the Pest side near the Chain Bridge, continuously pumping water from the Danube back into the icy river, flashing a wealth of Danube-related meanings from the Blue Danube Waltz to the shooting of civilians into the Danube.

Finally, we should mention the activism of Gyula Július, who wanted to have all the museums and exhibition halls of Budapest closed for a day under the title Visual Silence – on the 25th Anniversary of Marcel Duchamp’s Death (“While the exhibitions were closed, there were posters hanging on the entrances of the galleries, exhibition halls and museums with questions concerning these institutions’ right to exist and also their role in the present situation of society.”). It probably goes without saying what the result of this intention was.



# THE ART OF THE PUBLIC<sup>1</sup>

(SHORTENED)

A work of public art is not an ordinary object. Public space is a dynamic bundle of social, political and cultural practices. When deciding to create public art, an artist accepts the risk involved in working within such a fluid environment. They stimulate, challenge, comment on and experiment with new forms of the human being together or separately, being within and towards a given space, and influence what shape they take. Rather than producing artefacts, the artist develops – to use the concept formulated by Beuys – social sculptures, new forms of human gatherings, while art releases its public potential.

It seems worthwhile to define the characteristic features of the new generation of public art. Its descriptions frequently – and wrongly – focus on the spatial aspect. It is stressed that artists work outside the spaces traditionally associated with art. The fact tends to be highlighted that they leave the four walls of art galleries, contemporary art centres and museums. But it is the outcomes of this clash between an artist and the public nature of a space that appear to be more interesting.

This affects our perception of art and its role in the public sphere in a way that is as consequential as it is revolutionary. A degree of suspended control over the production of meaning and the actual shape of an artefact has a constitutive effect for good public art. The very system of art production thus falls under considerable impact. Yet the moment of making art radically public occurs at the intersection of politics and aesthetics, constituting the shape of urban community.

Let us take a closer look at how meaning is liberated. A public work of art is accessible to a large audience of ordinary people frequenting a given space, and not confined to regular visitors to exhibitions and previews. Rather than physical proximity, it is in fact the work's involvement in quotidian communication processes along with a degree of attendant disturbance it causes to them that makes it art. Good public art sets meaning free, bringing a promise of liberation and democratisation of view. According to Agnieszka Kurant, this is a kind of snowball effect, a rumour which is the quintessence of a public artwork. Joanna Rajkowska admitted on many occasions that she felt she had lost control over the message conveyed by her pieces

<sup>1</sup> The text was originally published in Kuba Szreder, "Sztuka publiczności," *Res Publica Nowa*, no. 4 (2008), 41-51.

*Oxygenator* and *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue*. The possibilities of protecting one authorised interpretation of an artwork are thin on the ground for artists, curators and art institutions when it comes to public art. An ultimate judgement cannot be formed here in a discussion between a critic, an artist, a curator and a knowledgeable audience.

The meaning of a public artwork is forged in endless conversations, gossip, and exchanges of views that our daily lives brim with. These communication situations tend to centre around specific sites, events and circumstances, and are tied to direct physical contact. The meaning is then mediated in a whole network of information exchange. The network, needless to say, has its junctions, gateways for sorting out information, and hierarchies of its production. It is much more difficult to gain dominance there than in the classic bourgeois white-cube museum. A striking feature of a public artwork is that anyone can potentially comment on it in a sensible way. Here is a homespun version of the “man of taste” with opinions informed by clashes between various people in various situations. This sort of discussion universally allows references to first-hand experience and second-hand viewpoints. As a point of reference, they are equal in significance to accumulated specialist knowledge.

More importantly, the traditional understanding of the museum as a playground of bourgeois culture, where bodies are socialised and the rudiments of sophisticated conversation acquired is broken with. Just like the living room and the café, the museum was an educational institution conducive to the development of deliberative democracy discussed at great length by Jürgen Habermas. Bodies were harnessed into specific mechanisms of behaviour; in the museum, a member of the bourgeoisie was both the viewer and the viewed, an object controlled by gaze. The lower classes “lacking the knowledge of how to behave and converse” were excluded from partaking in culture and, as a result, from entering public debate. In the case of public art, it is hard to say what type of gaze and perception should be activated. Let us consider *Oxygenator* as a laboratory for developing new approaches to shaping a common space and talking about it, as well as for establishing behaviour codes for new forms of democracy.

A professional debate among experts is taking place simultaneously, focussing on the figure of the creator and originality of the work. It is assumed that a given object is a work of art created by a given artist. However, a public work of art makes discussion and its axioms only one among a number of alternatives. “Nonprofessional” views are not easily disdained, while symbolic violence not confined to institutional limits exerts effects that are far more complex. Especially that expected reactions may, in public space, significantly exceed verbal codes. One should be prepared to actually deal with the language used by the “lower classes” to express their dissatisfaction – physical violence, devastation, but also some very different creative ways of using and beautifying a particular artwork, for instance, children using a battering ram as a seesaw, newlyweds photographed by the palm, tags on hoardings, benches by the little lake. Thus, the very shape of the work is modified, the original hides under the urban palimpsest. This has far-reaching consequences because the authorship of the project gets blurred. There is no way for an unknowing beholder to tell the difference between the original form of an artwork and its public version overwritten with new meanings and modified. Public art is an art with a hollow core to be filled by those who view it or partake in it. This brings to mind participatory strategies adopted by Robert Rauschenberg in the series *White Paintings* whose particular works were constituted by viewers’ shadows cast upon white canvas, or John Cage’s famous composition *4’33’’* for a silent orchestra.<sup>2</sup> Of course, in both these

2 Stella Rollig, “Between Agitation and Animation: Activism and Participation in Twentieth Century Art”, *transversal texts*, 03.2000, <https://transversal.at/transversal/0601/rollig/en>,

cases, works relied on a conceptual gesture performed by the artist or the composer who built the visual or musical piece around random behaviours of members of the public. Urban noise constitutes public art as well. But there is a fundamental difference: its very framework is far more flexible and modifiable.

Public art in this sense calls into question the mechanisms that constitute the world of art. Most intriguing here is the challenging of the position of the author who, pronounced dead again and again, is still alive and kicking. At the same time, authorship and the related idea of originality provide the foundation for an artwork's material and symbolic value. Since Marcel Duchamp's urinal and other readymades, it has been accepted that a work of art is not defined by how it has been produced, but by how its meaning is created and interpreted. According to Jan Świdziński, art is anything that is considered to be it by a specialised audience. An object then passes through endless processes of sanctification and celebration, which result in its economic value. The universal abandonment of an artwork's materiality in the 1970s coincided with a change in the production paradigm in the global system – the world. Capitalist centres switched from physical production to providing capital and highly specialised services in finance and management. Simultaneously, as the accumulation crisis struck and the gold standard was abandoned, the economy was becoming increasingly reliant on speculation. Similarly, the value of art began to be constructed through thousands of little exchanges which, boosted by human desire, brought about an increase in its financial worth.

This is obviously a market like any other; here as well the power to build symbolic capital predominantly comes from one's position within power structures, access to information and influence on its circulation. Duchamp's jokes, initially emancipatory, as well as conceptual strategies aimed at destroying and dematerialising art soon fell victim to commercialisation and became an integral part of the power mechanisms that govern the art world. It seems that this is also true about relational art and aesthetics. That was the name given to a variety of artistic practices popular especially in the late 1990s; Nicolas Bourriaud is the person considered to be the creator of another -ism in art.<sup>3</sup> He believes that art in societies relying on services and knowledge production, as opposed to material creation, tends to be relational in form as unstable temporal social relations triggered by the artist. Like Internet users, members of the public constitute a "community" inaugurated by the artist. Rirkrit Tiravanija or Pierre Huyghe, for instance, turned art galleries into eateries, cafés, hairdresser shops, and other meeting places. However, they tended to stay within typical power hierarchies of artist – work of art – audience. Claire Bishop rightly observes that participation which fails to affect power hierarchies should be seen as fictitious.<sup>4</sup> This kind of "relationality" eliminates potential conflicts and, moreover, is merely a fantasy about the subjectification of viewers. It involves changing social relations into an artwork with mechanisms of meaning attribution similar to those once at work in the production of readymades. The dominant position is retained by the artist (usually a male subject), who by the power of his mind declares a piece of passive – social or "dead" – matter art and attaches value to it.

However, should we adopt a perspective that allows for public art's origin in the artistic practices of the 1960s and 1970s, its radical creative potential comes forth. Especially intriguing were its connections with mass social movements as well as the

accessed 24.06.2023.

3 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods, and Mathieu Copeland (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2009).

4 Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (2004): 51–79.

employment of such “art forms” as happening, social sculpture or situationist interceptions. Guy Debord might have been right to detach himself from the term “art.” For him, it signified alienated professional creation, a (dubious) privilege of the thin and weary elites. He and Raoul Vaneigem much preferred to use the word “poetry” to describe the countless possibilities of creating our lives and surroundings. Joseph Beuys also believed in similar, dispersed and daily, creativity. His famous slogan – “everyone is an artist” – tends to be taken out of its political context and Beuys’s entire philosophy. He meant it as a demand for democratisation of art which was to accompany fundamental social and economic changes. In a sense, this is naturally the end of art as we know it.

It might be that public art is only phantom pain, ersatz social mobilisation on a mass scale. All it has to offer are escapist bubbles within public space, but there are no promises in it, only nostalgia for better days. Still, by re-examining the upshot within the aesthetic field of another revolution that is currently taking place as regards creating, accumulating and distributing information, an intriguing thought experiment could be carried out.

It seems worthwhile to interpret public art through the prism of the blogosphere and the tectonic shift in information production prognosticated by activists. For the first time in the history of humanity, a great number of individuals enjoy fairly easy access to the means of cultural production and distribution. After all, access to information and the opportunity to co-create it are now taken for granted by millions of internet users. Questioning authorship, collective methods of knowledge production, the existence of networks based on exchange and cooperation, Web 2.0 and user generated content, the blogosphere, MySpace, Flickr and Wikipedia provide the context even for the small lake with ozone in Grzybowski Square. One could follow in Walter Benjamin’s footsteps, investigating the correlation between the form of an artwork and the technological revolution affecting its production. In the context of public art, however, Jacques Rancière’s words sound more interesting. In his criticism of Benjamin, he writes: “It is thus the same principle that confers visibility on absolutely anyone and allows for photography and film to become arts. We can even reverse the formula: it is because the anonymous became the subject matter of art that the act of recording such a subject matter can be an art. The fact that what is anonymous is not only susceptible to becoming the subject matter of art but also conveys a specific beauty is an exclusive characteristic of the aesthetic regime of the arts.”<sup>5</sup>

The thing that brought democratisation to photography – any image could now be unlimitedly multiplied – wasn’t what made it art. Such promotion was possible due to the aesthetic revolution happening within perception regimes, which turned daily life events depicted in photographs into a section of socially accepted sensory universe. A worker was no longer a dumb animal, a speechless slave, but became a human being with his own voice to express the pain he felt and the harm he suffered, but also to present a vision of himself as a member of a community. If we transplanted the struggle of working people in the 19th century into today, we would see that one of its fundamental battlefields is the distribution of competences. A huge majority of political decisions is presented as unavoidable consequences of global processes comprehensible exclusively to a select technocratic group of experts. Their symbolic dominance relies on an antidemocratic foundation and exerts an adverse effect on our political system. A group of experts is put in a counter position to the rest of the community. Plurality is increasingly depicted as a silent flock of sheep,

5 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2011), 32.

unaware of the comprehensive conditioning determining their situation and hence unable to form reasonable judgements. Attributing passivity and obtuseness to it provides the ground for symbolic violence and domination. Hence acknowledging the competences displayed by ordinary users of a given space, be it a city square or the Internet, is of vital political importance.<sup>6</sup> This is why *Oxygenator* has generated such substantial reverberations. By accepting grassroots narrations, the artist creates opportunities for people to transform their immediate surroundings and, in this way, legitimises their status as residents of the city, as full members of the community.

Let's take a look at the prehistory of public art – let's assume that Beuys or Situationists, mentioned before in this text, were pioneers who caused a breach in what we consider perceivable. Hadn't it been for them and the idea of participating in every aspect of daily life, user generated content or other Web 2.0 technologies wouldn't be even conceivable. "Everyone is a Wikipedian" today. Obviously, this is not to advocate for techno-enthusiasm, and we should not let the risks inherent in new social technologies and their general tendency to commercialisation and consumerism slip out of sight. It is worth taking a look at public art in its dialectical relation with the new regimes of perception, production of the visible. Methods of functioning similar to those typical of public art can be discovered in p2p networks, Wikipedia or the SETI project, Creative Commons and the copyleft movement. They typically involve partially dispersed authorship, opening projects to modification, and networking for the construction of meaning. They also tend to be connected with (potential) interception of produced knowledge for the benefit of a larger community, its functioning outside the logic of competition and individual profit. A degree of selflessness, or dispersed interest calling into question the primacy of private interest is particularly intriguing.

In the 1990s, the hacker metaphor originating from cyberpunk, believed to provide an adequate description of the strategy employed by critical art, began to be overused in Poland.<sup>7</sup> Armed with deadly viruses, an artist was supposed to dismantle the system from the inside; a gifted individualist, they fought against an evil society. This myth needs to be re-examined, especially that it fails to represent the most interesting aspect of hacking – the conception of a new type of community, the production of identity and knowledge. There is, of course, an essential difference between an artist active in an urban environment and a group of hackers. The latter is a highly elitist set of people with a hierarchy based on meritocracy. Nevertheless, programming projects such as, for instance, developing the operating system Linux, are collective enterprises. Users of a given system test modifications suggested by members of a team, implement the changes and make their outcomes available to the general public. According to this model, an artist would be the initiator and animator of a public process whose nature would go beyond individual authorship. Urban space is also different from a programming project in that it requires no special competence from those operating in it on a daily basis. Changes made by its users tend to be fairly spontaneous, while the production of space takes place over a relatively small area. Still, public art commences a process of corporeal, physical negotiations and productions of space. Yet the moment of emancipation, of constituting new visibility regimes and shaping a democratic community is very unstable. Similarly to other open networking

6 ———, "Misadventures of Universality. Address at the Second Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art," 01.2007 <https://lust-for-life.org/Lust-For-Life/MisadventuresOfUniversality/MisadventuresOfUniversality.pdf>, accessed 24.06.2023.

7 Jacek Zydorowicz, *Artystyczny wirus, polska sztuka krytyczna wobec przemian kultury po 1989 roku* (Warszawa: IAM, 2005).



projects such as, for instance, Wikipedia, public enterprises are prone to vandalism, police enquiries, and all sorts of hostile takeovers.

Strategies adopted by public art are often used for non-artistic purposes. For example, marketing agencies employ them to accomplish commercial objectives. Gentrification processes make use of public art, and so does unilaterally understood urban regeneration. The situation is similar, if we are to follow Guy Debord's thought, when it comes to the ways of instrumentalization and commodification of art. Spectacularity experts do their best to sell their marketing actions as art, but there are some basic ingredients they don't have – suspension of meaning and promise of freedom. Advertising or this type of urbanism may profess otherwise, but their primary motivation is always to sell something or to prevail upon one to do something. Let's take gentrification and how it makes use of art, for instance. The so-called "SoHo syndrome" is a much-quoted example, and Sharon Zukin actually identifies an "artistic mode of production," here the production of economic value of a space. This process, which very much relies on artists, involves manipulating the image and significance of a given location to make it attractive to new and wealthier users of space. At the same time, longtime residents who cannot afford to pay higher rents are driven away. Such strategies tend to be overused in Poland as well, as the story of the Koneser Vodka Manufacturer in the district of Praga in Warsaw exemplifies.<sup>8</sup>

Needless to say, a view of the society as an all-encompassing spectacle may lead to counterproductive conclusions. The vision of a systemic monster that devours everything and denies us any possibility of changing our situation and social emancipation petrifies and saps our will to act. But the promise of freedom is still there, even more so than ever. The emancipatory potential of play, which provides foundation for an aesthetic revolution and promises universal human subjectivation, is absolutely invaluable. To cite Jacques Rancière once more: "In the Kantian analysis, free play and free appearance suspend the power of form over matter, of intelligence over sensibility. Schiller, in the context of the French Revolution, translates these Kantian philosophical propositions into anthropological and political propositions. The power of 'form' over 'matter' is the power of the class of intelligence over the class of sensation, of men of culture over men of nature. If aesthetic 'play' and 'appearance' found a new community, then this is because they stand for refutation, within the sensible, of this opposition between intelligent form and sensible matter which, properly speaking, is a difference between two humanities. It is here that the notion according to which man is fully human only when he plays takes on its meaning. Play's freedom is contrasted to the servitude of work. (...) These categories- appearance, play, work- are the proper categories of the distribution of the sensible. What they in fact describe are the forms of domination and of equality operative within the very tissue of ordinary sensory experience."<sup>9</sup>

This may be the way to regard various projects of public art – as fields of situational play in which one can – thanks to brief clearances – be at once a participant and a co-creator of a situation, leaving the daily regime of labour and grind behind. Public artefacts would be short-lived implementations of the Schillerian aesthetic state, Hakim Bay's Temporary Autonomous Zones or Foucault's heterotopias. They bring to life places wherein a different vision of the human subject and their liberty are possible. *Oxygenator* is one of those promises of freedom, its nursery and

8 I explored this matter in my article Kuba Szreder, "Koneserzy braku kontekstu," *e-teatr.pl*, 29.09.2008, <https://e-teatr.pl/koneserzy-braku-kontekstu-a58998>, accessed 24.06.2023.

9 Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge-Malten, MA: Polity, 2009), 30-31.



playground. In this sense, they carry a powerful political load, but for the very same reason they are highly susceptible to hostile takeovers. Rather than being durable, these are projects built on the ephemeral dialectics of invitation and reception, while open-endedness and the impossibility of them being attributed to a specific utilitarian pragmatics constitute their constitutive features.

Nevertheless, the element of play and selflessness does not seem sufficient to provide a comprehensive and adequate account of the situation. Let us, for instance, consider *Oxygenator*, used by many for a very specific purpose as a site for satisfying one's basic corporeal needs and deriving pleasure. After all, its users spent time there also to breathe in ozone. Therefore, Rancière's vision of seeking an egalitarian democratic community should be confronted with, for example, the biopolitical idea of the city. Antony Negri believes that the city is much fleshier and more permeated by capillary structures of power. It is the environment we live in and, as such, it provides us with everything we need to survive. It is in the streets that the biopolitical diagram of power and the political diagonal cross each other. Negri claims:

The biopolitical diagram is the space in which the reproduction of organised life (social, political) in all its dimensions is controlled, captured, and exploited – this has to do with the circulation of money, police presence, the normalisation of life forms, the exploitation of productivity, repression, the reining in of subjectivities. In the face of this, there is what I call a “political diagonal”, in other words the relation that one has with these power relations, and which one cannot but have. The problem is to know what side you are on: on the side of the power of life that resists, or on the side of its biopolitical exploitation. What is at stake in the city often takes shape in the struggle to re-appropriate a set of services essential to living [...].”<sup>10</sup> This view allows us to interpret such projects as *Oxygenator* as moments when citizens exercise their most corporeal right to the city. They use it as a life-sustaining resource, allowing its reproduction and development. At the end of the day, the city is a space for our bodies, as Krzysztof Nawratek puts it.<sup>11</sup> All the more reason for questions linked to new regimes of visibility and participation in the processes of meaning construction to be placed in corporeal power relations. As a matter of fact, it is fairly often that we are faced with biopolitical choices – on the side of life in all its ambiguity, or on the side of its exploitation. This thought is one to entertain as we embark on urban adventure, while whispering promises of freedom.

10 Constantin Petcou, Doina Petrescu, and Anne Querrien, “What Makes a Biopolitical Place? A Discussion with Toni Negri,” *Urban Tactics*, 17.09.2007, <https://www.urbantactics.org/documents/biopoliticalPlace.pdf>, accessed 24.06.2023.

11 Krzysztof Nawratek's webpage: <http://www.pluginincitizen.com/>.

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# MILAN GRYGAR – AUDIO VISUAL ART IN RELATION TO THE SPACE<sup>1</sup>

(SHORTENED)

## Acoustic paintings

In 1965, the painter Grygar created the first acoustic drawings on paper, in the realization of which he involved a specific expressive phenomenon of the spatiality of sound, connected to a point and a line in mutual temporal unity. The newly defined two-dimensional acoustic-visual form enriched the drawings with the sound-time dimension. It was essentially a dematerialization of the artistic act “from a white surface to the spatiality of sound, replacing color with a new medium.”

Drawings were realized by Grygar using non-traditional means: wood, later wire, a blueberry comb, a tin box, a glass, a bell and other objects made of various materials. He created compositions of geometrizing structures. Traces of used objects left legible records on the surface, which in countless configurations they divided the surface into individual segments. The acoustic event continued to become more important than the colour that the artist in the drawing eliminated. Colour has ceased to be a carrier of sensory perceptions; reduced to only black and white, it acquired new aesthetic qualities that depended exclusively on the intellectual aspect of perception.

he distinct acoustic sensation that accompanied the rapid progress of the drawing's realization led the artist to the idea of simultaneously recording the creation process on a tape. The resulting recording became the equivalent of a time-matched drawing. “Sound has become equivalent to drawing,” stated the artist. We can talk about the time value of a drawing and a sound recording, mediating acoustic-spatial perception, i.e. that we “hear” a given space. The objects used were transformed into a grouping of simple sounds and noises, embodying processuality and dynamism. They became “a record of the time sequence of the creation of the work, a continuous factor of the drawing, a reading of the drawing aloud.” The visual-acoustic level of the work became part of the realization in the constantly changing hierarchy of both components. Grygar continued to work with the sound component of the drawings, observing the mutual relationships of image and sound in them.

1 The text was originally published in Linda Sedláková, ed., *Milan Grygar* (Praha: Gema Art, 2009).

### Drawings with mechanical objects

The possibility of multiplying sound in a drawing and at the same time suppressing one's own subject in the process of creation of the drawing led Grygar to realize "mechanical acoustic drawings" in 1966. In some, he replaced hand drawing with mechanical objects. By involving these objects in the drawing action, they became drawing and sounding instruments at the same time. By transferring the drawing record to mechanical instruments, Grygar overcame the previous limits of physical action and made it possible to involve more mechanical actors – instruments – in the "game." The sound thus multiplied and layered, creating a sound space in which a simple sound element turned into a polyphonic one. Further sound multiplication allowed him to use two microphones, with which the artist picked up sound from different places in the space of the drawing, and to mix the sound in two tracks. Depending on the sound transformation, the graphic record has also changed. The rhythmisation and gradation of the drawing in time had the same importance as the composition of the drawing in the area. As tools, Milan Grygar deliberately chose simple metal parts, capable of self-movement, such as gears, screws, axles, he also included mechanical turnkey toys in the drawing action – a frog, chickens, a wolf, a blower, a fan or Ariston, Alpine bells.

When interpreting Grygar's acoustic drawings from 1967-1970, certain parallels with the principles of John Cage's musical and visual work appear. Jean-Yves Bosseur has defined Grygar's method as "impersonal", making indirect connections with the means used by John Cage in the sets of engravings for the Crown Point Press in San Francisco. These engravings from 1978 to 1992 are one example of the use of the basic principles of the musical method in visual art.<sup>2</sup> Grygar was guided by his own idea, which continued to be decisive after defining the initial strategy. This is confirmed by the rather demanding projects of realization of acoustic compositions, which he carried out in the span of 1969-73 in cooperation with the sound laboratory of the Institute of Theory and History of Art of the Academy of Sciences. However, in the case of the drawings, there is no direct connection with specific music, although the sound instruments used are apparently similar to the "objets sonores" of specific music; Grygar used them in their elementary form, and also the binding of the acoustic recording to the graphic was done in a definitive form, which did not allow the existing audio component of the recording to be interfered with and changed it. For Grygar, the drawing and sound recording were already coordinated into a closed unit at the time of creation and had their authentic value.

Acoustic drawings, as well as other visual-acoustic projects called "live drawings" Milan Grygar understood as staged events. Their wide realization possibilities interested him. "During the execution of the drawing, I am present as an actor, but also a bit as a spectator. There is something almost magical about it, the randomness of the score, the order hidden in the chaos. Each of these acoustic drawings is a kind of miniature happening, a live spectacle, full of surprises and poetry, rich in sound effects. Realizing a drawing in front of an audience brings me many stimuli. I am a magician, an artist, a musician and a choreographer at the same time."<sup>3</sup> Grygar then documented his actions using photography and film.

2 Jean-Yves Bosseur, "Milan Grygar and sound," in *Milan Grygar, Obraz a zvuk / Image and Sound* (Praha: GEMA ART, 1999), 16.

3 Ibid., 17.

### Drawings-scores and concepts

Numerous cycles of conceptual scores from the late 1960s, which Grygar realized as a follow-up to acoustic drawings, were based on the priority of visual graphic records, conditioned by the acoustic component. The first of them were created in 1967. At first, the author did not connect the previous acoustic drawings with the possibility of subsequent instrumental realization. However, the decisive impulse for further and more detailed investigation of the sound component was for him the meeting with the Greek Anestis Logothetis, one of the representatives of graphic music, i.e. the direction of new music, based on musical fiction, which relativizes the sound character of musical structures and uses autonomous reduced musical and notational signs. This personal contact led Grygar to focus more closely on the interrelation of sound and score. In the newly conceived drawings, or scores, it was no longer a simultaneous sound recording. They are basically a guide, an “artistic instruction” for sound transcription and present a wide range of interpretation propositions – from floor plan scores, pattern scores, color scores, through various other types of scores to architectural scores, sound plastic drawings and linear scores. Their choice creates rules that influence the origin, course and final form of the acoustic-visual relationship.

The link between the acoustic drawings and the first scores became Grygar’s ground plan of the “playground” as a place of sound realization. *The Floor plan scores* from 1967 and 1969 are, in this sense, “a plan drawing and delineation of the entire sound action.” With these scores, Grygar introduced a new aspect to the traditional understanding of the score. In the floor plan scores, he worked with a precise spatial layout of the actors and a predetermined number and distribution of sound sources, dynamics and time. He applied, in Bosseur’s words, “the strategy of the game” in them. The space of the scores was then enriched by another dimension thanks to the organic incorporation of “instruments” and the direction of their movements, determined by graphic signs on the surface. The sound was captured by microphones, which were located depending on the space of their implementation.

*Scores-patterns* were created in parallel with them, which sound elements use of a given system of graphic signs, they organize, or rather “induce only a certain geometric series or system” of sound components and determine their manipulation. Unlike floor plan scores, they therefore do not present a schedule and they do not determine the place of realization. They can therefore be understood on an even more abstract level.

Colour as a new component appeared in *Colour Scores* in 1969 and subsequent years. The audio plot was transformed into a grouping of several coloured dots in the area of the cartoon score. Colour components enriched the cartoon score with new possibilities, expanding its instructional ability. When interpreting, scores are read by individual segments or units and then colour and the distribution of dots represent optional sound sources.

Unlike them, the Architectural Score, divided into five parts, is a precise guide for interpretation, based on the principle of layering its parts. Here, Grygar replaced the floor-plan solution with a three-dimensional one. Through this visual construction of scores, sound can realize the spaces of architecture. According to the given schedule, designated sound sources are assigned to specific graphic elements, and the greatest emphasis is placed on the choice of a certain key. The method of interpretation of the Architectural Score (1970) was successfully performed in several performances by Erhard Karkoschka’s Stuttgart Group for New Music; it premiered in 1973 at the Theater der Altstadt in Stuttgart. It was also performed at the 3rd Stuttgarter Sommerkurse 1983 under the title Architectural Score (1970, Version, 1983, für zwei digitale

Klangsysteme und Projektion) by Ensemble Magic Triangle, T. Arns, K. Fessmann. This was no exception, a number of other scores were also interpreted, not only by Erhard Karkoschka, but also by Jean-Yves Bosseur, the Agon Orchestra, the Prague ensemble MoEns and others.

### **Sound plastic drawings, Linear scores and paintings**

Linear scores and Sound plastic drawings from between 1972 and 1993 are other variants of sheet music drawings, when sound became the spatial equivalent of the drawing. These drawings were created in certain series and variants, but the priority is artistic. But at the same time, they mean a new quality, taking into account a new aspect of the layout of the plane. The graphic features of the composition change, the emphasis is newly placed on sets of elementary geometric elements – structures of lines, straight lines and two- or three-dimensional shapes. These are no longer “structures of the constructivist type; the regularity of drawings and paintings is constantly called into question by sudden changes, the absence of expected segments and shapes, a violation of order” – Mojmír Grygar characterizes their nature. “In the disintegrating elements, which we perceive as “cracks” or optical illusions, chance asserts itself, which the given order it denies, exposes an ironic revision, privatizes.”<sup>4</sup> The author himself characterized these visual changes with the apt term “relaxed structure.” It is a change in the organization of the surface that does not bring about a radical intervention, but retains an optical affiliation with the given order of the drawing. Grygar constructs sound plastic drawings on the roughly identical principle of mutually combined layers of sound elements. They are a visual model, a kind of latent sound field. The basis is a small square grid, in which the presence of a sound element disrupts its regularity, most often in the form of an empty geometric section of various shapes, accented by a border with a coloured line. These shapes are grouped in the raster area in various configurations, merging or overlapping to represent the audio transcription.

In Linear scores, dated between 1976 and 1993, he follows a similar principle as in sound plastic drawings, but this time it is based only on the structure of the drawn grid of horizontal parallel lines and curves. The visual structures of these drawings paraphrase the combinations of sound elements. Grygar understands them as “drawings with a spatial idea of sound, which is contained in the action of the line.” He defined with them the time frame of the space where the sound can develop. Each of them is thought of as a “track in time.”<sup>5</sup> In the words of the author, a line is “an imprint of energy, orientation in space, on the surface and in time. Its substance is duration.” It is the carrier of sound; sound interpretation is directly related to it. The specific idea of sound, its movement and dynamics coincide with the disruption of a regular visual composition, the creation of elementary geometric configurations or a change in colour. Violation of the order occurs at the edges and inside the area. The middle part is usually calm and compact, the rhythmic changes usually concern the beginning or the end. Together with the colour differentiation of the lines, the scores have a different form, from a two-dimensional transcription of three-dimensional geometric forms – pyramids, cubes, etc. to compositions of identical, color-differentiated geometric shapes.

The scores were performed by the Agon Orchestra; one of them, Linear Score from 1981, was realized at the Warsaw Autumn on 20/09/1993, another in the same

4 Mojmír Grygar and Milan Grygar, *Image of sound and sound of image* (Dortmund: Dortmunder Kunstverein, 1992), Exh. cat.

5 Bosseur, 21.



year on the occasion of the opening of the Second Exit exhibition at the Ludwig Forum Aachen (Aachen).

The first *Spatial Scores* are dated 1982. They are drawings and paintings, illusory hollow geometric shapes, into which originally planar structural grids of linear scores were formed. In interpretation, the idea of hollowness becomes an element of acoustics. The space is sometimes built up by colored linear hatching. Violation of the order by changing the direction of the lines optically divides individual segments of geometric bodies, most often pyramids, cubes and cylinders. Variations of different projections of parts of these shapes arise, which relativize their geometric regularities. It is an illusory connection of the unconnected – volumes and surfaces in space.

### Antiphons and Pictures-Scores

The basic requirement to achieve an autonomous multidimensional image, which Grygar continued to pursue since 1987 in black and white images from the 1980s and 1990s, culminates in the numerous Antiphon ensembles, which he realized from 1996 and whose image variants he is still working on today. The antiphon, the principle of which is present in every piece of music, has its origins in the old musical form of the liturgical verse, the verse sung at church mass, where “voice against voice, form against form” works.<sup>6</sup> The very name of the paintings thus evokes “the sound dimension” of the work, perceived in time-space contexts. Antiphons become a visual transcription of a musical act. The morphology of these images is minimal, reduced to the primary elements of handwriting, they are made up of monochrome geometric figures or lines. The first sets of red or white paintings of smaller square formats were based on the dominant colour red. The musical aspect was evoked in them by two colour combinations – in addition to red and white, rarely red and black. Monochrome colours accumulate light in themselves, which illuminates the space of the composition. The pictorial composition is built on the principle of the golden ratio and geometric rules, which determine the organization of coloured geometric elements in the pictorial space. Their order can continue to be determined by the principle of dividing the surface in the confrontation of the harmonic with the unharmonic – mechanical. Some of the Antiphons the artist conceived as diptychs. “The newly emerging form of the diptych expresses the theme of duality or unity in duality, reflected by it in a whole range of aspects.”<sup>7</sup> Antiphon’s large-format paintings marked another step in the relativization of pictorial space. Their vocabulary was further reduced by Grygar. A black vertical at the edge of the image, a small black or white square in the upper corner, or the line of a circular section are the only “spatial events” in an otherwise empty, white, endless space.

In Antiphons from the last period, after more than forty years, Milan Grygar returned to the colour that formulated his early starting points as a painter. It is a conscious return. It was foreshadowed in the 1980s by straight lines and circular sections of complementary colours in black images. The artist abandons the elementary colour composition of red, white and black geometric elements. Pictures of small and large square formats become colourful geometric constructions of monochrome fields, implying ideas of different variants of spatial relations. Their order continues to be determined by the application of the principle of the golden ratio in confrontation with other mathematical rules of area division. These organize not only the internal image composition, but also the sets of image formats into diptychs. While in the

6 Milan Grygar. “Antiphons.” Interviewed by Karel Oujezdský. *Atelier*, no. 23 (1997): 3

7 Jiří Zemánek, “Grygar’s ‘sounding handwriting’ and ‘absolute drawing,’” in *Milan Grygar, Obraz a zvuk / Image and Sound* (Praha: GEMA ART, 1999), 42.

Antiphon paintings with basic geometric shapes in their centre, the sound action took place inside the space of the picture surface, or rather embedded in their centre, these geometric compositions are part of spatial actions in themselves. They are constructed by a composition of coloured fields, which are divided by colour-different surface segments in diagonal, vertical or horizontal shifts. They associate spatial ties that are sometimes barely perceptible. Some colour recedes, moves into the depth of space, another comes forward – the space of the image opens up.

Paintings created in the last two years simultaneously with the *Antiphons*, Grygar calls *Paintings-Scores*. The investigation of other connections between image and sound and colour and light, and the acoustic-visual experience so far led him to a radical step. He incorporated a new element into the monochrome space of the image – a vertical relief image strip. It becomes a basic element of the visual structure. Its golden colour expressively articulates the light. But at the same time, it is also a materialized sound. The monochrome surface, constructed again according to mathematical laws, is transformed into an infinite spatial acoustic field, where sound is present through this action-plastic vertical: the contrast of the monochrome image field and the plastic golden structural element creates tension, the energy contained in it is the equivalent of a sound event.

*Paintings-Scores* offer yet another possible direction within the capacity of systematic investigation of acoustic-visual connections of the unmistakably original concept of Grygar's open work of art.

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# FROM THE ART OF ACTION TO THE MULTIMEDIAL INTERACTION<sup>1</sup>

The development of Czech art into today's alternative and multimedia creation, which is also applied in public space, took place from the second half of the 1980s in parallel with the adoption of a postmodern way of expression. Conceptually, it was based on the philosophical sources of Ludwig Wittgenstein's "language games", Jean-Francois Lyotard's "metastories" and "opinion plurality", Michel Foucault's "historical discontinuity" and Jacques Derrida's "deconstructive differentiation." These spiritual sources were authoritative for our artists until the turn of the millennium. However, a number of other artists with valuable creative potential still drew from older philosophical sources of the 1970s, from the concept of "bodily experience" and the phenomenology of perception by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the fundamental ontology of Martin Heidegger's existentialism, the understanding of totality and radical otherness by Emanuel Lévinas, or from the dynamics of "the natural world" by Jan Patočka. The evaluation of the immediate experience of the artist, summed up in the slogan "here and now" as a conceptual platform of the action art of the 1970s – body art, land art, environment and performance, was also reflected in today's work in public space.

Action art also included the political subtext of artists' protest against the political and cultural unfreedom of the normalization period from the early 1970s to 1989. From collective presentations in the open air and alternative spaces such as Malostranské dvorky (1981), Setkání ve Stromovka (1982), Mutějovice Symposium (1983), or from exhibitions in the Chmelnice Club or the Opatov Cultural Center (1985), a distinct direction was born, giving priority to a confrontation with the archetypal contents of our consciousness, a return to the life-giving sources of culture and the demystification of thought clichés, before the postmodern appropriation of visual language signs and the content game with quotations. The development of Czech art since the mid-1980s has been divided into a trend preferring constant symbols and a trend preferring variable symbols, although in principle one does not exclude the other. However, the trend stemming from action art mainly shaped spatial installations in various forms and opened the door to foreign collaboration

1 The text is an updated lecture presented at the symposium at the AVU entitled "Islands of Resistance" in the Trade Fair Palace of the National Gallery in Prague, 2012.

(*Dialogue Prague – Los Angeles*, 1989 to 1990). It also led to the development of media expression during the 1990s, when, for example, nine international exhibitions and interdisciplinary symposia were held in the monastery in Plasy alone in the years 1991-1999, with their outputs affecting interactive and multimedia creation at the onset of the young generation.

Creation carried out under the term “site specific” is probably the most significant output of action art in connection with the philosophy of the here and now. The term is used for art, working with a certain place in a certain locality. Sometimes the synonym *in situ* is chosen – installation on site. It is essential that works that were created in a specific place and in certain areas of the wild or even urban space, as well as sacred or industrial, cannot be transferred to another place without further interventions and modifications. This is their uniqueness and unrepeatability. They are then tied to a specific place by a specific content context – natural or architectural, social or historical, psychological or political. Among the early examples of the 1980s, let us recall, for example, the colorful mosaic of fallen leaves from four different trees in the landscape, called *Forest carpet for a random mushroom picker* (1986) by Ivan Kafka, realized in several variants as early as 1999 in Prague’s Stromovka park, or the author’s historical installation of 73 throwing stone balls from Bohemia and Slovakia under the title *Present past, Past presence* in the premises of the Banská Bystrica barbican in 1991. These formally simple works anticipated later more demanding site specific works, for example in Federico Díaz’s biomorphic architecture under the name *Geometric Death Frequency-141* in 2010, assembled by robots from 420 thousand plastic balls in the entrance of the MASS MoCA museum in Massachusetts, USA. The installation was further developed with photons of light and the movements of the audience in the transformations of ultra-red light and shadow into the interactive form *Outside itself* in the port hall of the Arsenale at the 54th International Biennale of Contemporary Art in Venice in 2011.

Another prototype of action art, transferable to different places at different times, was in the 1960s “environment”, as a concept of a constructed environment, often associated with some “event.” Due to the possibility of transmission and repeatability with the use of gallery spaces, it was understood rather as a “non-place”, a type of work that expands the viewer’s perception with the experience of directly entering a specific environment. Among the later examples of this type, let us mention, for example, Vladimír Merta’s installation circuit entitled *Sliced Chestnut Grafted* at the Archetypes exhibition in Mánes in 1993, representing a set of tree stumps on which, in addition to wood-destroying mushrooms, fishing trophies and balls, telephone sets were also grafted, allowing viewers to connect with each other. Or the author’s socio-critical construction of *Public Geometry* from his exhibition in the Špála Gallery in 1994, consisting of three parts on three floors – *Drawing with beer* on the ground floor (undulating pipes with flowing beer from two barrels to the tap, where it was actually tapped); *Armyshop* in the basement, created from authentic military uniforms and other used military goods; *Fitness center* on the 1st floor with real exercise equipment. However, we can see the connection to the environment of the 1960s even later, for example, in the sophisticated construction of Dominik Lang’s *Sleeping City* in the Czech pavilion of the 54th International Biennale in Venice in 2011, based on a reflection of our post-war history and an assessment of the socialist past. By combining his own father’s sculptures and original elements, Lang created an environment that testified to the futility of the efforts of modernist art, adversely influenced by ideology and politics.

The combination of actionism and conceptualism, the so-called “sculpture-object” also developed, as a work tied to a certain place in nature or the urban landscape, with the aspiration of becoming a modern monument or at least a specific memento of certain historical and cultural conditions. The mere plinth of such an object or the underlying surface of a roof, tower, column or wall here expresses a meaningful connection with the chosen place, although the object creates a separate space for perception by its content and size scale. E.g. the sculpture-object *Chair* by Magdalena Jetelová with a social-symbolic subtext, originally exhibited at the Malostranské courtyards, later on the steps of the UPM under the name *Descending from the Staircase* in 1981, was washed away in 2002 by a century-old flood 40 km from Prague to the village of Vraňany and to the park museum on Kampa island returned in the form of a transformed wooden replica made from washed-up trees. A similar object was presented in the ideologically and symbolically coloured neon *Crown of Thorns*, placed on the roof of the Rudolfinum in Prague (2001) or in the red *Heart* at the Prague Castle (2002) by Jiří David. David Černý's objects were no less impressive in this sense, e.g. his *Pink Tank* repainting the historical tank of our Soviet “liberators” after World War II (1991), now housed in the Lešany Military Museum, or *Entropa* (2009) by the same author, a relief mosaic of stereotypical cultural symbols of the member states of the European Union, located in the congress hall in Brussels. Then the controversial objects of the Ztohoven group cannot be forgotten either, whether it is a fictitious atomic bomb explosion with a panorama of the Krkonoše Mountains, broadcast on TV by one of the live reportage cameras, or the modified signalling for pedestrians at intersections in Prague from 2007 by group member Roman Týc.

The art of action did not spare the classical discipline of painting, drawing or photography with its impact. Given that action painting is now an established concept, it has also become the subject of frequent citations or appropriations, e.g. in Evžen Šimera's series of *Dripping Images / New Drippings*, which as a “painting-object” bet on the circumstance of unpredictability in artistic creation. Later, the author's idea was further developed, e.g., in his *Action paintings in weightlessness* (2009). These paintings recalled the outbursts of gestural action painting from the gallery into the public space in the early 1990s, for example in the paintings-objects of Petr Kvičala, whether it was his sand lines in the convent of the Plasy monastery (1993) or the installation of red pigment in the Behémót gallery (1994), later developed into linear algorithms in the form of urban murals (*Zig-Zag Art*, Brno 2009). In a similar way, drawing was also influenced by action, for example the exhibition of Vladimír Kokolia's *Drawings* in the New Hall (2007), in which the artist plastered the gallery space all around with a band of small drawings, drawn from the main part directly on the spot. Furthermore, in 2008, an exhibition by Ladi Gažiová was created in the Gallery of Critics under the title *Yesterday I Disinfected the Whole Sky* in the manner of street art or graffiti, where in the form of a tunnel made of paper and with a drawn street, one went through the space of the gallery to its end to a massive impaled elephant – a kind of prefiguration of hell in the context of the author's grotesque humour. In addition, drawing today no longer develops only in a space or living environment like graffiti or street art, but also within itself, where it creates a genre of narrative comics or manga, intended for further processing into animated forms. And when it comes to photography, let's remember one of the first authentic points of action, not in the sense of recording an outdoor action, but within the medium itself. For example, there is Veronika

Bromová, whose photo series *Beings* (1997) created probably one of the most original iconographies of the theme of the body using new digital techniques.

We can come to the conclusion that from simple forms of action, art gradually developed along its main line to more complex sophisticated forms even in public space as one of the possibilities of multimedia creation and interaction in art, reaching the mainstream today, thanks to valuable conceptual intentions and the use of new technology. The art of the event emphasized, above all, the direct participation of the viewer in the creation process and, with the use of modern technology, amplified this principle in the presentation of a work of public space, whether real or shared virtually. It has reached the use of a wide range of possibilities within our environment and in the electronic record to such a high level of digitization that we are already talking about the post-media age (the term of the actionist and theoretician Peter Weibel), in which artists create new alternative contexts. They arise in the sense of hypertext chains or sociological research, revision of our memory and imagination, through which they gain new potential to communicate their original messages.



# THE FICTITIOUS AND THE PICTORIAL WORLDS<sup>1</sup>

(SHORTENED)

The two-year work on the catalogue was accompanied by a search for historical contexts in order to best express the prerequisites for Czech media artists. The selection of works of art took place on the basis of submitted projects, in many cases the method of their technical realisation was still being sought. Some of the artists embarked on a path of experimentation not only with unknown technologies, but also with bold themes.

The work of Zdeněk Sýkora, which was accompanied by misunderstanding in Bohemia for many years, can also be evaluated in this light. Apart from the pioneering use of the computer, the artist's contribution lies in the fact that he gave up the possibility of communication and distanced himself from the ideas that usually precede images. Sýkora took on the very impersonal role of an artist – the maker of images. In his paintings, unpredictability and chance play a major role in a predetermined logic. He investigated the internal regularities of the image, given by surface, colour and line.

Most of the exhibiting artists belong to the younger and youngest generation. Their attention turns from the essence of the work of art to the moment of creation and is accompanied by the need for communication. In addition to objects and installations embedded in traditional materials, some works are immaterial in nature. The screen, the most popular carrier of the moving image, is the supporting element of several works. It inspired Tomáš Ruller as an object in itself – it is a bottle with a luminescent layer, which is able to receive the signals that make up the television image line by line. A beer, wine or demijohn bottle is a container for intoxicating but emptiable contents. Lubomír Čermák placed televisions in his egg cages. His work makes visible only a small part of the ubiquitous waves of the four most watched television programs. It doesn't create something new; it just draws attention to the information flow of various images that surround us and that we don't perceive, but nevertheless constantly influence our emotions and our life. The archetypal shape of Šárka Sedláčková's sculptures personifies

1 This text was originally published in Marta Smolíková and Ludvík Hlaváček, eds., *Orbis fictus: nová média v současném umění / new media in contemporary arts* (Praha: Oswald, 1996).

certain beings. A light changes colour and intensity flickers in the place of their heads. The semi-transparent material abstracts the TV image into a light aura that shines from inside the head. Robert Novák's object paraphrases an hourglass on a scale, and the electronic image of the sand has such weight that it outweighs the shoulder when the time comes. What measures it is not a physical regularity, but a programmed concept of the object's mechanics.

The image of the world is the theme of Martin Janíček's exhibited object. He projects fragments from the surrounding world in several layers onto a huge drum. He hopes that the moment one abandons the evaluation criteria, his work can have the same effect as, say, a mandala. Veronika Bromová is interested in the construction and deconstruction of the portrait, which consists of various details, essentially technical images. She calls them unpainted pictures and thereby alludes to human identity, which is perceived according to external signs. Michal Gabriel usually works with traditional sculptural materials, with tree trunks or bronze, but for this exhibition he was excited by the idea of a virtual sculpture, which consists of three basic geometric bodies of the same volume, and had them created in a computer. He is fascinated by the possibility of a perfect design and simulation of the material of the sculpture, which can be projected into a real environment.

Monika Karasová's virtual landscape represents an artificial fictional world where there is no room for anything more than what is put into it. Tomáš Mašín's film *Hotel* is based on human imagination. David Cajthamel together with Fridrich Forster work with a laser beam. Sound is activated and modified by touch, physical contact. A person enters the sound field and the interactive component engages them in the work. A new aspect appears here, namely the course, a unique course of individual experience and perception of the work, determined by the viewer himself. David Černý's *Mrchy* in turn corresponds with his sense of humour. At first glance, this is a humorous installation, where one is not allowed to see the images, because they disappear as soon as they are approached. The installation expresses the alluring elusiveness of the electronic image. Elen Řádová's installation also uses sensors for human movement, if we approach the smiling girl's face, her smile suddenly disappears. If we are not deterred and move on, the face fills with anxious fear. Jan Trnka's *Full Room* confronts the viewer with a combination of real and virtual space. A person walking through an empty space sees the identical passing perspective of the room on the canvas. The projected space is enriched with attributes that, if a person approaches the corresponding place in real space, activates virtual objects with their presence. With his project, Libor Benda fuelled our curiosity: will artists use such technologies after the end of the Cold War to point out the possibility of their non-military use? Benda decided on Tamara, a Czech invention of a company from his hometown, the former Tesla Pardubice. The title of his work refers to another fact: after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the sale of this technology is practically impossible.

Pavel Kopřiva used satellite data for the weather forecast. The spectacle stems from his mistrust of blindly accepting universally accepted definitions and formulations. He presents the viewer with two versions – numerical analog-coded information sent to Earth by satellite, and thus the moment the viewer approaches, he decodes the numbers into an image of the atmospheric envelope of our planet. Nettle is fascinated by the so-called “identical information” expressed in different forms. Milan Guštar, a software engineer by training, participated in the implementation of several art projects. For the exhibition, he designed an experimental minimalist, immaterial installation called *Void*. It sends invisible and inaudible Theta waves into a moderate neutral space with the intention of inducing a special

state of consciousness for the exhibition visitor. According to research, these waves are produced by the human brain during meditation or intense concentration. Space is the theme of Janka Vidová – Žáčková's exhibited work. Her very first computer animation *Black and White* magically draws the viewer into the infinite depth of a dynamically breathing space. With minimalist purity, he brings a constructivist picture of the micro and macro world. This work is inspired by the physicist Stephen W. Hawking, who attempts to describe the universe by summarizing individual theories, starting with Aristotle's and ending with the latest discoveries about black holes, with an emphasis on the theory of time.

The image on the projection surface of the interactive installation *Spin* by Federico Diaz reacts to sound and the movement of the pupils – by looking at a certain place, the viewer activates and develops a lava-like image. To enhance the overall experience, everything is placed in a special inflatable room and accompanied by a sophisticated sound component. Part of Diaz's work is inspired by one of the leading American physicists, to whom he contributed significantly to changing the current worldview. David Böhm, in turn, supported a new picture of the world with the theory of the coiled (implicative) and unfolded (explicative) order. He claims that in the developed order, everything is embedded in everything and can develop in different degrees and in different ways. Similar to how our brain works when it manifests memories in consciousness or the principle of holography. Böhm's theory of explanation is strangely identical to the views of Mikuláš Tusánský, who, in the middle of the 15th century, contributed to the disintegration of the unified image of the world and the philosophical-ecological system of the Middle Ages.

The installation of the exhibition is based on Comenius' book *Orbis Pictus*. In addition to the updated ways of sensory mediation of concepts of the world, which is made possible by multimedia means, the viewer has the possibility of a unique comparison of the historical shift in the concept of substantive concepts. These were always interpreted by Comenius in the broad context of relationships. The present presents them freely, but above all in isolation, which makes them mere placeholders for idols. Comenius, who strove to create a universal system, believed that particulars are able to prepare a person to understand the whole. He lived on the threshold of modern times, and his conception of the world was formed at a time when there was still a comprehensive view of the world. His *Labyrinth* describes two faces of one world – one apparent and at the same time apparent, and the other hidden, which is true. The central motif of the world is the delusional glasses through which the pilgrim looks at the world. The current wide range of devices and technologies gives rich opportunities to learn about and co-create the shape of our world. There are perfect display media, powerful computers with enormous operating memory and endlessly branching communication networks, capable of transmitting an immeasurable amount of information, texts and images. All this, together with experience, helps us revise our paradigms as we enter the next millennium. The inspiration of artists and their collaboration with science is nothing new; art, scientific and technical knowledge have always been closely related in the past. The last major period of this relationship was right on the threshold of our modern history in the Renaissance era of Jan Amos Comenius, whose knowledge of the world, as shown by this exhibition and, in short, the catalogue, is still a rich source of inspiration today.



CRITIQUE  
OF CRITIQUE

# A PAINFUL FAREWELL TO MODERNISM. DIFFICULTIES IN THE PERIOD OF TRANSITION<sup>1</sup>

## Mental Walls Replacing Real Ones

The fall of the Berlin Wall and, somewhat farther to the East, the fall of the Iron Curtain seemed to suddenly connect the Eastern bloc – the part of Europe which until then had been hermetically sealed off – with the West. The euphoria and ecstasy soon wore off, and it gradually became clear that the dismantling of the intellectual and mental Walls is arguably a much more painful and prolonged process than the demolition of physical ones. We still continue to run into remnants of the Iron Curtain which obstruct the way of fast and smooth progress. Previous artistic strategies determined by the political situation and the moral, artistic values that were originally developed along the lines of political resistance and eventually turned dogma proved to be a serious, obstructive burden to the period of transition which, as it seems, can only be left behind slowly and gradually. The earlier, forcefully isolated, introspective and self-reflexive period produced reactions, norms, supposedly solid axioms, basic principles, a glass-house rhetoric akin to a sign language, visceral reflexes, fears and suppressions which have not ceased to haunt us, like ghosts left behind by the past. In spite of all the convincing argumentation, the West was unable to offer its help in the dispersal of the remnants of the Wall, as it was busy trying to face the trauma caused by the disintegration of its previous image of the East, and by the consequent loss of its point of reference. The processing of this trauma on the other side, although it is not an existential issue and the conditions for it are incomparably better, is just as painful and long drawn out a process as the earlier loss of a self-image and the construction of a new one in the countries belonging to the former Eastern bloc.<sup>2</sup>

The illusionistic trick of walking through Walls that was performed by the self-confident generation of the 1980s in contradiction to physical reality does seem

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2 Ilya Kabakov's works reflect precisely on this deeply ingrained image of the East and the connected prejudices, stereotypes and repressed fears of the West (Dislocation, MoMA, New York, 1991; documenta, Kassel, 1992; Venice Biennial, Russian Pavilion, 1993), and the fact that these still continue to live on may be the reason for Kabakov being the only member of the previously multifaceted Russian unofficial art who was able to make a career in the Western sense after the fall of the Soviet Union.



in retrospect – at least as far as the likely prospects were concerned – like a mirage. Despite impeccable theoretical grounding and professional erudition, what could be witnessed, instead of the adaptation of the new paradigm and the announced prevalence of the postmodern, was the workings of the last, unrestrained and jubilant, great wave of Modernism.<sup>3</sup> It was a period when the spectacular and victorious march of the rearguard of Modernism was being performed with the kind of faith that belonged to the standard-bearers of Postmodernism. Basically, it was the two extreme traditions or formations of Modernism that clashed and succeeded each other on the common platform of Modernism. One of these was the militant avant-garde tradition rooted in the twenties, with its urge to reform society, its world-redeeming utopianism, its missionary zeal and its political radicalism that professed the principle of “the end justifying the means.” The other, ostentatiously retreating from the terrain of real life, of social and economic problems in order to become a partisan of a transcendent notion of art hovering above all of these, was a formation of the so-called late Modernist period that developed after the Second World War, marked by Clement Greenberg. Until recently, the partial merging or spectacular separation of these two opposed attitudes, artistic behaviours and beliefs – and even more so their rotation – had been the bedrock of collective thinking about art in Hungary in the second half of the 20th century. Naturally, the two were never so clearly distinguishable. The main borderline stretched between official art supported by the state, the prevailing political power, and unofficial art which, according to the growing or weakening of political pressure, was either banned and forced “underground” or was tolerated as “merely” undesirable.

The experience of “shared trenches” was not only reflected in a feeling of solidarity among members of different generations, but it also contributed to the blurring of sharp distinctions in other aspects as well. In the context of political oppression, even the most autonomous works dealing with abstract, immanent artistic issues took on the features of resistance, or at least were interpreted as such insofar as they demonstrated their emancipation from state control. On the other hand, works that carried messages of political resistance were forced to use a sophisticated, encoded and symbolic language, and all sorts of camouflage tactics in order to prevent possible reprisal and to elude the vigilance of the authorities. Those who chose to refrain from direct, unambiguous political messages demonstrated their opposition to the didactic language preferred by official cultural policy in the field of form. The new painting of the 1980s provoked the dislike of the “soldiers of the avant-garde” by, among other things, denouncing the tacit rules of the game, by rejecting the position of resistance and by withdrawing from the field of play in order to articulate itself in an international context. Therein, it was able to use the institutional background, the network of galleries and art dealers, and the channels of publication that belonged to this external context.

After the fall of the previous political regime, the illusion of a quick and painless artistic integration quickly vanished partly because the wave of New Painting had, in the meantime, left the international scene, and partly because the theoretician of its Hungarian representatives moved abroad, thus not really stimulating and instructing

3 Analysing the divergence of theory and practice in the German and Italian Neo-Expressionism of the 1980's, Craig Owens sees it as an authoritarian movement which, despite its rhetoric, seeks power and dominance. This implies the market-oriented intervention of the masculine artist-hero which he sees as inevitably tending towards an inglorious future and towards kitsch by way of the apologetics of traditional values, the adaptation and compilation of time-honoured methods, and their conservation for the sake of success. (Craig Owens, “Honor, Power and the Love of Women,” *Art in America* 71, no. 1 (1983).) From various aspects, his analysis is strikingly valid for the Hungarian variant of the movement.

his native art scene?<sup>4</sup> The sudden change and expansion of the art scene came as an unexpected turn for most members of the Hungarian art world, and found them unprepared. The fresh currents of air rushing in after the fall of the Walls swept out the cosy feeling of security, and along with it the set of values in which the notions of good and bad, valuable and worthless had been nicely arranged in a concept of Modernism fitted to local political conditions. In the sudden flood of light and unexpected spaciousness, the old, stable points of reference disappeared and there were no new ones to replace them. It was impossible for the hermetically enclosed art world of the East to clearly perceive through the peep-holes how thoroughly the image of the world had changed, together with the world of art, not to speak of the current discourse in art, and that in the paradigm shift, which had taken place in the field of art, the massive constructions of Modernism had been dismantled. The “tailor-made” links that connected the Eastern bloc with the world, the special channels of communication and sets of values reserved for it suddenly lost their justification and ceased to function. The open or covert forms of resistance and subversion no longer excited Western minds, they lost their previous attraction, their politically exotic, “Eastern” and “trans-mural” features, thus suddenly appearing on the market as competitors. Moreover, everything that until that time had been accepted as some sort of idiosyncrasy started to be seen as deficiency and incompatibility in the enlarged, global art scene. This sudden vacuum, laden with problems in orientation and evaluation, undermined the stable, but temporary prosperity of the 1980s. According to its practice, this period was rooted in Modernism but, as far as its theory was concerned, it anticipated Postmodernism and carried in itself the chances of fertilization and development, even if it dragged on far beyond its justifiable life-span.<sup>5</sup>

The wheel of time started to turn backwards in Hungary: a period began during which political and artistic compensation and gratification was being offered, along with retrospective administrations of justice for sustained injuries. It was easy to tailor the strategies, methods and rhetoric of opposition to the new situation in a region that was traditionally used to polarities and clear-cut images of the enemy, to the arrogance characterizing all movements and counter-movements, to the visceral reflexes of exclusion, and that had had a long history of intolerance. The borderline simply shifted to the territory occupied by the diverse factions of the one-time political opposition that had only seemed to be united, but which had in fact always been greatly divided. In the relation of both politics and art, an introspective, past- and locally oriented, intensive context was once again created by the – successful – expansionist claims of the artificially stifled generations that were previously forced into opposition and driven abroad, and by the characters whose moral stance transformed them into mythical figures. This context was hostile to foreign voices and to voices belonging to any sort of Other that were certainly not easily interpretable with the old categories, and to attitudes and mentalities that diverged from the customary, Hungarian understanding of art. Invisible, mental walls were gradually being erected: the generation of the 1990s found itself, willy-nilly, behind these Walls, carrying the massive load of its intellectual heritage.

4 In 1990 Lóránd Hegyi became the director of the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Museum Ludwig Wien.

5 This is especially true for Russian artists of the opposition who were forced underground in the 1970s and 1980s, and whose popularity soon diminished after the fall of the Soviet empire, similarly to the waning success of those privileged colleagues who had emigrated to Western centres of art which development caused serious identity and orientation problems in many of them.

### Old Reflexes Die Hard

The Wall and the Iron Curtain of yore not only isolated us from the world beyond, but they also functioned as jetties, filters, or protecting shelters: they slowed down, tamed the heaving billows of the outside world, screened the new trends, filtered the elements and interpretations that were incompatible with local conditions, and thus became effective tools for the “correction”, transformation and local adaptation of usable material. Not until the formerly closed societies opened up, did the workings of this mechanism become clear upon comparison with the international trends; it was at this time that misunderstandings were exposed as such, alterations that occurred during the placement of certain elements into new contexts became apparent, and new light was shed on differing layers of meaning in the use of art-related terminology.<sup>6</sup>

During the second half of the 1980s, while the mechanism of power, its legitimizing methods and its representation in science, in the media and in art were being analyzed and deconstructed all over the world along the lines of French post-structuralist philosophy, in our part of the world the notion of power still tended to refer only to the currently governing political power. Later on all over the world, the analysis of the mechanisms of power was being extended to all kinds of everyday power relations – the private sphere included – to questions of dominance, to issues of sub- and superordination and to the revelation and discussion of the mental and psychological modes of adjustment related to these. We still continued to interpret the concept of politics as being equivalent to nothing but high politics, to the mechanism of governmental political power and to reflections thereon. The social sensibility that strengthened in the art world of the 1990s found no worthy response in a region where these issues lost their validity and became suspicious, extra-artistic subjects as a result of their appropriation and manifold manipulation by the state.

Foregrounded or new categories and disciplines also bore different connotations and significance in the differing socio-cultural context of Hungary. Individual frailties, desires, fears, life stories and memories were strictly relegated to the private sphere in our country where political opposition had absolute priority over any kind of self-assertion. The explanation is that the private sphere was the only terrain which could more or less withdraw itself from the control of political power, from the paternalistic supervision and “care” of the state. Hence the public and the private, real life and the reality of art had no chance of mixing here, while the international art scene of the 1990s was intent on making these formerly enclosed terrains interpenetrable, and to bring closer or merge previously distinct categories. More precisely, the private could seep into higher regions even here, but only if it was able to leave behind its material character drenched with reality and to lend itself to the free soaring of the *ego*, if it could sublimate itself into something transcendent or mythological. The disciplined troopers of art marching forward in close formation in the 1970s were replaced by the artist heroes of the 1980s, by the colourful bazaar of private mythologies and “individual strategies.” Even if this pluralism was highly limited and only exerted its influence in a narrow spectrum, it did have an erosive and refreshing effect if compared with the prior ascetic, somber and monolithic period.

As we approach the turn of the millennium, the West seems to be just as thoroughly psychologized as the East is politicized, and there are no signs of a possible change in the status quo. In our part of the world, psychology has been traditionally

6 A number of studies called attention to the misunderstanding, for example, of American Pop Art and to the alterations that occurred as a result of local adaptation. See e.g. Éva Forgács, “Andy, Marilyn és a Tehén,” *Új Művészet*, no. 6 (1991): 12-15; Edit András, “Utolsó pár előre fuss! [Those in the Back Get up Front],” *ibid.*, no. 7-8 (1994): 4-12, 102-03; Katalin Keserű, *Variations on Pop Art* (Budapest: Művészet, 1994).

regarded as something fishy that creates mistrust, for in the hands of political power it has often been used against the individual. By turn, from the individual's point of view it meant the loss of control, discipline, alertness and readiness for the fight on the one hand, while on the other it implied the danger of being decoded, of bursting the mythical bubble surrounding the artist-heroes. In this region, the concept of art that sees it as a transcendent category, as an entity necessarily distanced from life and from mental and psychic processes, is still flourishing, and it is also a widely accepted practice to continue to rigidly separate professional, elite high culture from suppressed "subculture" and the mass art of popular culture and to position them in a system of hierarchical relation. By contrast, such polarities have practically vanished beyond the "Walls", where the notion of art is being developed in the context of newly defined categories of Postmodernism.

The globalized art scene of the multicultural 1990s showed less and less tolerance towards the aggressive claim of European cultural superiority, its identification with absolute values, with so-called "universal" art, the expansive and exclusive implementation of its civilizational norms and values and their authoritarian imposition as the only possible canon. Furthermore, as a result of the nomadism of the 1990s, the juxtaposition of the national versus the international has less and less justification. Nevertheless, perhaps as a way of compensating its long-term exclusion, East-Central-Europe still continues to stubbornly and heroically support the myth surrounding the almighty powers of European high culture, and to nurture its missionary zeal and arrogant, aristocratic pride. In this field too, the West reveals its Janus-faced nature: while it is forced to accept the questioning and loss of the priority of Europeanism, and the redrawing of the world art map in relation to the Eastern bloc, it still continues to apply traditional, deeply ingrained, colonialist methods, as if suddenly forgetting itself. Some artists, members of out-moded, eclipsed movements of the 1970s and 1980s, would gladly import their teachings and themselves to the newly created art market, under the delusion that it is possible and desirable to make up for lost time by way of intensive courses. At other times, seeing this region as a kind of savage, wild, virgin land, "missionaries" full of civilizing zeal often volunteer to implant the new ideas in order to help these people "catch up", while totally ignoring, in their infinite enthusiasm, both context and limits of tolerance in the receiving environment.

### **Cracks And Gaps in the Wall**

The new generation of the 1890s is undoubtedly the repository of the intellectual take-over, even if it keeps constantly pressing against, bumping into and getting entangled in the cobweb-like Walls, even if there are often serious contradictions between its theory and practice, between its proclaimed and actual artistic links. Even while it perceives, with its delicate feelers, the different currents of air, and reflects, if only hesitantly, upon the contemporary international trends – seeking answers to the vital intellectual and social dilemmas generally troubling the *fin de siècle* – it still does not seek legitimization by way of parallel, international trends. Instead, it links itself with "authentic" figures who have acquired a mythical status as a result of their prior moral courage. Thus, it sometimes happens that in this ambiguous, transitory period, the new generation, instead of making its appearance with a special artistic program of its own, professing a discontinuity in relation to earlier ones, becomes, somewhat anachronistically, the accomplisher and the associate of earlier, unrealized programs that feed on strategies belonging to past times. At other times, theory and practice conflict with each other, when in the process of interpretation, they use notions and phraseologies belonging to a prior, inherited and acquired paradigm of art to describe,

define and interpret works conceived within a different conception of art, which are actually the products of Postmodernism.

### **Women's Assistance in the Removal of the Rubble**

Notwithstanding their role in cutting off information, there is no better proof for the functioning of the Wall and the Iron Curtain as beneficial filters, and for the general adherence and even addiction to them than the selective attitude that worked its way into public thought as a kind of surrogate; in so doing, refuses to accept change with all its positive and negative consequences, fostering the belief, after the fall of the Wall, that it is possible to choose between what concerns us and what is “not our problem”, thank you very much. The rigid rejection of any gender-oriented thinking and its tenets, and of even the mere legitimacy of problems raised by it, was the stance that enjoyed a general consensus regardless of gender, age or political affiliation.

The deceptive change of paradigm in the field of art during the 1980s reproduced parallel formations also from the aspect of there being not one sole woman present in it, not even for the sake of appearances.<sup>7</sup> And just as it happened all over the world, while the stars of New Painting were busy building their careers and achieving financial success, the women, under no such pressure of the art market, concentrated – mostly outside the medium of painting – on their own inner selves, on issues of art, on their situation and on their own voice. After the decline of New Painting, it seemed as if female artists had suddenly materialized out of nowhere. However, in spite of the seemingly coinciding features, there was one basic difference between the Hungarian and the international developments. Namely, that the artists, curators and critics who ventured to cautiously broach issues of gender already in the spirit of the 1990s suddenly found themselves, despite their intentions, in an oppositional situation. This position was established not by an institutional, art political rejection, but by a mental and intellectual seclusion, by strong prejudices and stereotypes, which elsewhere had already become compromised. The deeply ingrained avant-garde tradition, with its inquisitorial faith in the exclusively redeeming nature of its one and only truth, rejected and stigmatized them in the false belief that they are the pendants of the truly oppositional, American feminist movement of the 1970s. It was from the platform of a one and indivisible, universal art (admitting only differences in quality, while exclusively enforcing its own categories in the determination of criteria) that the Hungarian advocates of late Modernism rejected the voices which subtly queried the absolute validity of their monolithic conception of art and which were articulated already in the context of Postmodernism. The standard reaction of those who intolerantly rejected and excluded any form of expression that deviated from their dogmas – and any form of otherness, as such – towards those who were against the consensus was subordination, and their relegation to the sphere of a marginalized subculture of limited legitimacy. Obviously, any artist would object to such a degrading procedure. This unified rejection of a mentality that in other parts of the world had already become the prime mover and an accepted, organic part of the general theoretical discourse was symptomatic of missing developmental stages, the premature abandonment of paths, which had a thoroughly distorting, debilitating effect. It was a local reaction which reenacted a phase long superseded elsewhere and which was the very opposite of contemporary trends abroad!<sup>8</sup> The merging and simultaneous

<sup>7</sup> El Kazovsky, the only woman artist from the younger generation actually involved in this process, constructed her complicated private mythology on the basis of a demonstrative rejection of her biological gender, and on the complete inversion of her gender identity.

<sup>8</sup> Examining the historical-structural frames and borderlines of medieval Europe, the excellent Hungarian historian Jenő Szűcs, following in István Bibó's footsteps, calls attention to the dangers of skipped developmental stages and prematurely abandoned roads, as these



presence of various (even conflicting) effects and attitudes can also be detected in the works of art and in the various artistic stances.

During the long period of isolation, the lively intellectual discourse that started in the 1970s, its intricate philosophical, psychological and art historical background and the vast literature it produced were practically unknown, as were all the movements and trends surging from it, and the marked, strong generational differences in attitude and perspective. More precisely, after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the Wall, all these poured into Hungary without any selection or precedents, blurring the boundaries between all kinds of prior and posterior approaches and argumentations that showed fundamental differences in mentality and strategies, and also between the artistic solutions, materials and voices resulting from them, and unknown, later phenomena qualified according to earlier categories and prejudices.<sup>9</sup>

In the international art scene of the 1980s, stepping beyond the confines of a mere movement, a subculture and its oppositionality, the issue of the construction of identity, the question of divergence from the consensus, and the problem of Otherness originally raised by women forced into a marginalized position became a part of the mainstream, and the theoretical starting point for a cool, rational analysis of the construction of social, racial and gender identity, and of the outward or inward legitimization of any kind of dominance-based relation. In the 1990s, what became the main field of investigation was the micro-mechanism of the subject, integrating itself with authoritarian power structures, copying and interiorizing their organization. The historical, sociological and psychological analysis of its formation, functioning and representation became an organic part of the postmodernist, deconstructionist discourse in art, in which process women, and their modes of approach acquired a determining role. The questions of the 1970s that were raised from the aspect of constructing and defining a female identity have become part of a larger, multicultural context, and lost their gender specific nature by the 1990s. The key category of “abjection”,<sup>10</sup> which in the beginning was used in reference to women, to misogyny, and to all kinds of exclusion and delimitation, gradually acquired an increasingly metaphoric meaning, and became applicable in the analysis of the mechanisms belonging to any sort of cultural model based on dominance and segregation. The notion became applicable to phenomena as diverse as for instance, the repression of certain parts of the integral whole, of the self (in Western cultures the repression of the body and of feelings) on the one hand, and the foregrounding, valuing and absolutizing of other elements (like the mind and rational thought) on the other, or to the subordination of women (and supposedly feminine traits) to men (and to values identified with men). However, further enlarging the field of interpretation, even to phenomena like the feeling of superiority white “civilization” has had over the “primitivism” of people of colour. We do not have to go very far to recognize the same excluding mechanism at work in nationalism, in the positing of one’s own (often only imagined) characteristics as values compared to those of others, and in the xenophobia, anti-Semitism and racism of those who ignore the legitimacy of the Other, and who relegate all those undesirable traits of the self that are to be rejected and repressed to the domain of those they seek to exclude.

undermine clear period changes, and imply ambiguous, contradictory solutions laden with the burden of earlier features. He points out how features of the feudal development in the East, differing from that of the West, are handed down to the period of capitalism. Jenő Szűcs, *Vázlat Európa három történeti régiójához* (Budapest: Magvető, 1983).

9 Elaborated in: Edit András, “Vizpróba a kortárs (nő)művészetén, (nő)művészekén,” in *Vizpróba* (Budapest: Óbudai Társaskör, 1995).

10 Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).



All these are categories that can hardly be regarded as alien to this region, or as “not being our concern.”

In any case, even the most cautious, instinctive, initial and probing explorations of issues (especially if articulated by women, thus provoking visceral reflexes) are here adapted as dangerous, fearsome tenets that subvert and undermine the status quo, or as ignorable, apocryphal, non-canonical and peripheral events and interpretations that lie beyond the circle of “serious” and “grandiose” categories belonging to high art. This invariably happened when the legitimacy and validity of earlier, well-tested and deeply ingrained notions and categories of art were not acknowledged, and when certain artists sought and found their natural context outside this framework. The fact is, that works created by women in the Hungary of the 1990s could be interpreted less and less along the lines of earlier, formalist categories; in other words, the modernist approach greatly narrowed and reduced their possible fields of interpretation. The links with international trends can still be clearly traced, even if the deeply ingrained methods of suppression, concealment, encoding and strong sublimation go against this sort of exposure.

The shift in attitude can be noted even in the case of artists using traditional genres and methods, in whose works one can clearly see the tendency to disintegrate, and to make transparent the earlier rigid borderlines and categories, and to use deceptive and destabilizing effects (Éva Köves, Róza El-Hassan, Erzsébet Vojnich, Agnes Szabics). At the same time, if working in the national grain, the deconstruction and subversion of standard representational patterns and clichés may be linked with traditional media and vehicles, such as painting (Ágnes Szépfalvi), or sculpture (Orsolya Drozdik), whereas elsewhere (especially in American culture), these same modes of expression are used more in media like photography, video and electronic media.<sup>11</sup> The critical tone of the younger generation is already of a less biting sort; instead, they prefer using a softer, more subtle voice, even while exploring historical issues, or the development of clichés, stereotypes, prejudices and models related to gender roles (Judit Hersko, Bea Veszely). All in all, the kind of perspective that is based on the analysis and the deconstruction of the representational forms of science, art and especially the media has difficulties in establishing itself in this region, and is primarily characteristic of artists living and working either permanently or temporarily abroad (Orsolya Drozdik [New York], Judit Hersko [San Diego], Valéria Sass [Berlin], Tünde Kovács). By turn, the aversion to works full of personal intimacy that are based on narrative, biographic elements and experiences and on personal memories is, for reasons already discussed above, also strongly persistent.

On the other hand, natural materials with strong symbolic connotations (e.g. soil, clay, reeds full of sap sprouting in water, etc.) and metaphorical elements (hollows, caves) are highly wide-spread and popular in our context – even if they are not part of a conscious program, namely the identification with nature, with the female discipline of Jungian theory (Ilona Lovas, Ilona Németh, Mariann Imre, Mária Chilf, Lenke Szilágyi). We can also find representations of mental, psychic relations (Kamilla Szíj's fragile, “chaotic” mesh of lines), and their visual confrontation with strictly conceptual or tactile relations (El-Hassan Róza), along with playful, sensual works that mock the dry, lifeless gravity of Conceptual art related closely to the tradition of resistance (Emese Benczúr). Through the activity of women artists the instruments of art started to incorporate materials, activities, objects and themes largely associated

11 More precisely, the group of “artists” and that of “applied artists” (including photographers), having strongly disparate educational backgrounds and attitudes, separate themselves from each other in castes, as a result of which even the shared trends that could mutually reinforce their efforts hardly meet and have no effect whatsoever on each other.

with the experience of women, and traditionally classified as belonging to popular culture, as being “extra-artistic” and part of women’s gender and social role: organic materials (Ilona Lovas, Ilona Németh), leaven, dough, wax (Ilona Lovas, Mária Chilf, Mariann Imre, Ágnes Eperjesi), food, cooking and baking (Zsuzsa Csizmadia); pregnancy, childbirth, baby (Agnes Eperjesi), babies’ clothes (Tünde Kovács); the techniques of weaving, spinning and sewing. However, any sort of otherness, any kind of gender-related, sexual, ethnic or racial deviance from the norm, from what is “normal” still continues to be regarded as taboo subjects, and as secondary, minority issues relegated to the field of medical pathology, ethnography, sociography and cultural anthropology. Works which are concerned with the mechanism of discrimination, with the aversion, fear and exclusion of otherness and foreignness, and which apply perspectives diverging sharply from traditional viewpoints still continue to irritate public thought in art (Luca Göböllyös, M. C. Csáky).

We do have, however, a wide variety of works related to the body, i.e., to one of the most significant trends of the 1990s, although it is striking how few artists concern themselves with the contemporary representation of the body, and especially with its self-presentation in popular culture, among other things, in pornography (Csáky M. C.). In Hungarian art, the body is not even usually represented in its own scale and sensuous, physical reality, but rather in a symbolic, metaphoric manner. However, in spite of the strongly encoded, transposed and abstract language, these works do allow for hidden sexual allusions and associations with sexual and erotic content, which come across in spite of the shift in scale and dimension, the distancing effect of the way in which materials are handled or the foreign context (Ilona Németh, Mária Berhidi, Ágnes Deli). The changes in scale sometimes produce the effect of already being inside, in some sense; handled as an independent entity, as a physical reality “turned outside in”, the represented space is suddenly endowed with bodily functions. At times, these works continue the ancient tradition of associating female sexuality and sexual power with the devilish, the demonic and death (the *femme fatale*; e.g. in the works of Ilona Németh), or they metaphorically carry contents related to the punishment and subjection of the body (Gyöngyi Kámán), while at other times they evoke or counterpoint bodily qualities (Róza El-Hassan) or, more rarely, are employed to explore and articulate the relation of the *fin de siècle* to the body and to investigate the development, and the historical and cultural roots of the tradition of representation (Orsolya Drozdik, Judit Hersko).

During the 1990s, as a result of the activity of women artists, new materials, techniques and genres have been included in the field of art, enriching the vocabulary of visual language. A further result has been a new way of thinking, a new sensibility, new modes of approach and new kinds of messages which all have a positive, invigorating effect on the whole of art, and which help reveal certain layers in works of art which were concealed or unacknowledged thus far, and which the one-sided, formalist modes of interpretation inherited from the avant-garde or modernist period would not make possible.

Finally, what else can be signalled by the demonstrative appearance of three of them, of three young women artists, Róza El-Hassan, Judit Hersko and Eva Köves, as the official representatives of Hungarian art at the 1997 Venice Biennial (after an earlier gesture made to the West, to the outside world [1993] and an homage to our own national past [1995]), if not that, the moment for an intellectual changing of the guards, for a cultural transition has finally, if somewhat belatedly, arrived. That the wheel of time will hopefully roll forward from now on, and that our separate cultural development shall henceforth be replaced by a joint progress and common thinking with the world.

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# MESSAGE TO THE MESSENGER. COMMENTS ON JÁNOS STURCZ'S ARTICLE<sup>1</sup>

Dear János, we received the message, I received it. I am reading the text in shock. It was not the accusations, the assumptions, the professional condemnations that surprised me. I have often had the opportunity to read similar things in recent years. But until now, we have been in the way of others. Up to now, we have been dealt the status of extreme avant-garde, imitators of Western trends; now, as I see it, we are also characterised by conservatism and narrow-minded provincialism (and of course we had already been manipulative and had already sought exclusivity before, with the help of a few art historians).

What you write is not sociology, despite your claim. The assumption that the "Iparterv" generation had already made a "reassuring, comfortable compromise" with the ruling power in the Kádár era cannot be considered a sociological statement. What does this sentence mean? How do you know that "they still insist on taking into account their former oppositional role"? When did we insist on this and why?

How are we to understand that we have become artists supported, travelled, acquisitioned (by, and owing to, the ruling power?)? Do you have proof of this? It is, of course, not sociology that members of the two generations "have fallen into the academic cul-de-sac of an aestheticizing, conceptually and intellectually weakened formal painting left over from the hollowed-out trans-avant-garde." Whether this "beautiful" sentence is true is, of course, not for me to judge. But if your writing is not sociology, what is the "message" for which you morally and professionally "void" two generations? And – and this I find utterly incomprehensible – why use such a method and style? Are you perhaps unaware of the situation that, after decades of art-related information blackout, is now presented by an underdeveloped art market, the battered state of art institutions and the scarcity of exhibition spaces, as at least four generations of good artists are treading on each other's heels? And that this situation is not caused by the two generations you are attacking – for in your opinion, they are the ones who are seizing the opportunities. What opportunities?

I don't believe that pitting generations against each other is to the benefit of Hungarian art. All I hear these days is the need for, or the fact of, a "generational

<sup>1</sup> The text was originally published in: Imre Bak, "Üzenet az üzenőnek – Észrevételek Sturcz János cikkéhez," *Új Művészet*, no. 8 (1998): 44. Translated by Dániel Sipos.

change”, and not at all the importance of cultural and artistic continuity, the need for intergenerational relations and dialogue, which is not only the strong suit of Italian, German, English, Polish, but also of American art. It is also possible, of course, that the “message” is based on a false expectation, which you deny in your article, of course: “I do not expect our fathers’ generation to respond to each new phenomenon by threatening to give themselves up and, say, abandon painting and start making political art on the Internet”, since in other parts of your article you miss politicism and criticise the use of painting as a medium. (After Peter Weibel’s big exhibition *Pittura Immedia* at the Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle!)

This debate is of course very important, and should have taken place much sooner. Not only to raise awareness of such circumstances of this difficult situation that are beyond our control (that it is not the artists and the generations who are preventing each other from working and showing their work), but also because of the complicated and not quite clear-cut situation of art in Hungary and in the world. Because it is not only different generations that live side by side, but also very different artistic programmes and opportunities. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly difficult to assess value, quality and standard (a number of big and “prestigious” international exhibitions are a good example of this). How many of us admit that it is not possible to define values and value systems, because the latter implies a value dictatorship and the former lacks the necessary conditions? The sign is emptied, it has no meaning, “the author brings the words and the reader the meaning.” Art is what I, the person, but at most a small community, consider art. Everything is art, everyone is an artist.

There are no criteria. But how can we interpret and evaluate without criteria and reference points? Even the most comprehensive and well-established system of reference, art history, is supposed to have come to an “end.” Moreover, alongside modern art, the postmodern programme is already in circulation, whose systems of criteria – which are in many respects completely contradictory – not only coexist, but often – especially in our country – even mingle. There are a number of scholarly publications discussing these issues, on which there is no consensus at all.

How is it possible, in the midst of such professional complications, to imagine that a dozen or so artists (with the “exceptions” you mentioned), representing a wide range of styles and two generations, with decades of references: numerous exhibitions organised by Hungarian and international experts, their presence in important public collections, etc., can be ‘dismissed’ with the above-quoted summary expression of professional and moral implications.

I would not like you to read offence into my writing (of course I am not happy that you have such an opinion of us). Nor that we cannot take criticism, as you suggest. All I would expect is for critical opinions to be well-founded and professionally justified, and for us to take into account the pluralism of values, the possibility of the simultaneity of different generations, artistic personalities and ideas, and for us to show tolerance and sensitivity towards them. To be able to examine and evaluate an idea within its own set of criteria (perhaps in the context of its own history, its own antecedents). Because, in the meantime, there is a great lack of professional interpretations that would facilitate the reception of art and would provide artists with extremely meaningful feedback. I hope that, instead of “messaging”, we can have normal, professional and friendly conversations about all of this one day.

# MESSAGE TO THE MASTERS. ON THE PROBLEMS OF THE ASSESSMENT AND SELF-EVALUATION OF CONTEMPORARY HUNGARIAN ART IN THE PERIOD OF TRANSITION<sup>1</sup>

*Art historian János Sturcz was invited to write this essay as a foreword to a representative exhibition of Hungarian art. In return for presentations of contemporary Polish art in Hungary early last year, the exhibition was brought to Warsaw to provide a reliable panorama of recent Hungarian art. This time, the catalogue foreword was not written by the organiser and curator of the exhibition, justifying his choices, but delegated this role to leading art historians, who also addressed important problems of contemporary Hungarian art in their writings. However, written with the intention of drawing attention to the contradictions of those choices, this essay by János Sturcz was the odd one out among the papers. According to our latest information, Sturcz's essay was not included in the Polish-language catalogue, but our editorial staff regarded it as a polemic and sent it to leading art historians and artists specialising in the period to express their opinions or counter-opinions. We have already received feedback, so a debate on the subject is to be expected soon. (P. S.)*

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Large, coolly elegant canvases, frozen gestures, empty, “existentialist” spaces, avant-garde allusions, sacral ovals, geometric shapes and “post-geometric”, “Central and Eastern European” form fragments, gold, soot, neon and iron. The image our representatives paint of themselves is solid, balanced and unproblematic. There are no doubts, no questions, only positive statements. But about what? What answers are they trying to provoke from me? Do they even want to communicate with me?

<sup>1</sup> The text was originally published in: János Sturcz, “Üzenet a mestereknek – A kortárs magyar művészet megítélésének és önértékelésének problémáiról az átmenet időszakában,” *Új Művészet*, no. 5 (1998): 37-40. Translated by Dániel Sipos.



The exhibition is a muster of the most distinguished Hungarian contemporary artists. Everything good has already been said about them, their image and the interpretation of their oeuvre – mainly owing to the work of *Lóránd Hegyi* – is more or less established. For this reason, since it is not so much their art as their art-political situation that provokes reactions from me, I would like to write more about their sociological situation, the anomalies of their self-evaluation, the ambiguity surrounding their assessment, and the social causes of this; in other words, about problems of identity and values in the Hungarian art scene. First of all, it should be made clear that the group of exhibitors is **not uniform**, despite the fact that the vast majority of them are from the same **circle of painters** that introduced new painting to Hungary in the early eighties and has since represented Hungarian art at international exhibitions, such as the present one. Nowadays, however, they are not the only ones who can come forward, but also the young artists representing the tendencies of recent years, although it would have been more democratic and healthier if the exhibitors had not been rigidly divided into generational groups, “senior” and “junior”, but had been given the opportunity to engage in dialogue and to compete in the same league (in Poland), instead of implying their due place in the hierarchy. However, the old roster of painters is already complemented in this exhibition by two artists (Imre Bukta and Ilona Lovas) who were for long regarded as outsiders, but who have by now become, in the best sense, fully fledged artists, working with objects and installations, reflecting on the present reality and surreality of Central Europe. They are joined by a number of artists who have worked abroad for a long time, who think not so much in terms of “pure” painting or sculpture, but rather in terms of a more open framework of genres, who collide the phenomena of the two art forms, and who make use of the critical and playful lessons of New Realism (Gyula Konkoly) or the more abstract lessons of conceptualism (János Megyik, Dóra Maurer, György Jovánovics). Therefore, the problems I am about to discuss below do not apply at all to the first three, and only partially to the latter three.<sup>2</sup>

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This roster of representative painters and sculptors is considered by institutions and the mass media to be “living classics” of contemporary art, some of them Kossuth Prize winners, most of them college professors, many of them have had retrospective exhibitions of their life’s work in the exhibition rooms of the the Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle, the Budapest equivalent of the Zachęta in Warsaw, and almost all of them have received the most prominent state award for fine artists, the Munkácsy Prize, and have been awarded the best Hungarian and international scholarships (DAAD, Herder, Pollock, etc.), thus having had the opportunity to spend extended periods abroad, exhibiting in some of Europe’s (and to some extent the USA’s) most prestigious museums and galleries, many have been featured at the Venice Biennale and have good relations with Western, especially German, gallery owners. Yet, a not insignificant fraction of young artists, art historians and the audience regard the values represented by some of the group as outdated, accusing them of academism, emptiness, outmodedness and the monopolisation of opportunities, while some of them are offended and see themselves as ignored, misunderstood, written off or repressed. There is much truth in both the arguments for their recognition and their denouncement. Indeed, all of them can claim an impressively coherent artistic

2 A special place is occupied within the group, by Ilona Keserü and Sándor Pinczehelyi, who have been living slightly reclusive lives working and teaching in Pécs, but who have occasionally been admitted to the exhibitions of the new painters, and who also display stylistic similarities, but their position and role is different from those based in Budapest.

career and *oeuvre* in painting, especially when one considers that many of them began their careers as neo-avant-garde artists militantly rejecting painting. Some, I believe, have even partly retained the high level of intellectuality or emotional fervour characteristic of their avant-garde beginnings. But it is also true that, at this stage of their art, they do not relate to the artistic problems of the nineties and lack the existentially moving freshness, reflecting on the present situation, that used to characterise their performance in their early days. However, the primary concern here is not the problem of quality or modernity – to which I shall return anyway – but the socio-cultural-political reasons for the ambivalences of their assessment. One of the main causes of the anomalies in the group's assessment and self-evaluation is not, or not only, to be found in the artistic values they represent, but in their management, its **art-political environment** and, consequently, their schizoid relationship with the former and current state authority.

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The exhibition essentially features the most representative painters and sculptors of two interconnected generations and groups of artists, the first being those in their sixties, the so-called “Iparterv” generation, the second being those around forty-five, the so-called “Rabinext” generation. Each of the two “vintages” is named after an exhibition space. Iparterv was the name of the architecture office in Budapest's city centre where the first large-scale representative exhibition of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde was held in 1968; this was the first time during the communist era that Hungarian artists adapted contemporary Western art – Informel, hard-edge, pop art, conceptualism, happening – and tried to create some Hungarian variant of it at the same time and present it. That participants of that exhibition represented here are Bak, Hencze, Jovánovics, Keserü, Konkoly, Nádler, but in terms of approach, Pinczehelyi, who emerged with conceptual Warhol variations, and in terms of age, Klimó and Birkás can also be added to the list. The latter was the brains behind the next paradigm-shifting exhibitions of the Rabinext Studio in 1983, which introduced post-avant-garde new painting, and Kelemen was also a founding member of the group. They were soon joined by both the Iparterv artists, who had started out from the neo-avant-garde and had previously rejected sensual painting, and younger contemporaries coming from other directions of postmodernity, hyperrealism, performance and installation (Fehér, Mulasics, Szirtes, Trombitás, Záborszky), and gradually adapted to the aesthetics of the „new sensibility” theoretically outlined by Lóránd Hegyi. Thus, a roster was assembled, which Lóránd Hegyi – the first Hungarian art historian and -manager, then a member of the department of foreign affairs at the Múcsarnok/Kunsthalle, now the director of the Museum der moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien since 1990 – forged into a unified group by means of his efficient theoretical work, and which then represented Hungarian art at almost every Western European exhibition in the eighties. In this way, the “team” – as they like to call themselves – not only enjoyed the hatred of those who were constantly left out, but paradoxically also the support of the late socialist state apparatus, and their painting became recognised as official art in practice. For at the end of the Kádár era, the cultural government realised that an up-to-date art form of the Western type, but apolitical compared to the openly and radically political attitude of the previous neo-avant-garde, such as Erdély, Hajas and Hajnóczi, and, moreover, with decorative and narrative painterly values that they considered to be understandable and thus harmless, could improve the image of the already apparently liberal Hungarian state in the eyes of the West. Some of the artists of the Iparterv generation found themselves in an uncomfortably schizoid position; they began the Kádár era as “oppositionists”, as banned artists, and

ended it as supported artists. As such, the younger generation, starting in the early eighties, no longer had to face the problem of being in opposition.

The “new painters” were not only the most popular among a section of intellectuals outside the avant-garde, but also the most recognized by the state, the most travelled, the most acquired in public collections. This, anticipating the present “transition”, was a subconsciously reassuring consensus, a comfortable compromise between the intelligentsia and the authorities. Make no mistake! This situation does not, and in itself, is not an appraisal of the qualities of our artists at the time, it merely pertains to their sociological situation and reception. Moreover, their artistic performance at the time is much less contestable in the context of the then existing system of relations than it is now, when, although they may have changed within their own formal language, they are essentially continuing the artistic strategy they began fifteen years ago. However, the fact is that it was probably because of this schizoid situation that the political ground was cut out from under their feet, that the oppositional nimbus which was part of their image, and which partly gave them credibility, had evaporated by the time of the regime change. This schizoid situation may be the reason why the group still does not judge its political situation realistically, and their public manifestations,<sup>3</sup> as evidenced by their public self-evaluations, show that they still want to maintain the image of the “repressed” artist of the previous regime, who is still “progressive”, and that they still want to preserve their oppositional “charm” and their former political attractiveness. Yet, they have long since ceased to be either outcasts of state cultural policy or the sole disseminators of the latest values of world art.

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Even before the war, there had not been a democratic art scene in Hungary, and we did not have a strong, functioning avant-garde, like in Poland. So we had no organic avant-garde tradition to continue, not least because artists and scientists who were in step with contemporary universal values – think of Bartók or Szent-Györgyi – were systematically driven out of the country. In this way, Hungarian art could not be judged either in relation to the up-to-date values of world art or in relation to some kind of internal evolution. In Hungary, the avant-garde operated for long periods in semi-legality or in opposition, and therefore the artistic and political aspects, the artistic achievement and the oppositional, moral role were inseparable in the assessment of artists, such as the Iparterv group, who tried to keep up with contemporary art. In their present-day **historical assessment**, this past condition is a disturbing factor, but it is also one of the greatest obstacles to the advancement of contemporary Hungarian art, because they still insist on ‘taking into account’ their former oppositional role, as in this manner we cannot get a handle on the oeuvres and current roles of the most important artists of the recent past. The critics of the time could not write critical reviews about them, could not examine them “objectively”, in their chosen context, in relation to Western art’s points of orientation, examining their true degree of originality and true value, without raising the suspicion of collaboration with the repressive state authority. And in today’s political context, the question is: what has allowed their image to become too rounded, too closed and self-contained, fettered even, almost to the point of being bulletproof? For there is no doubt that they are excessively surrounded by a cloud of frankincense, and – as Éva Forgács, for example, has already pointed out – there has been no historical evaluation of their life’s work, no differentiation between of their

3 On this, see their reminiscences and interviews with each other in the issues of the fine arts magazine *Balkon*, published since 1993, which has been “rehabilitating” them for several years now.

past and present political and artistic achievements. Of course, I am not implying a political attack here, but a real, professional, art-historical analysis. I cannot remember anything like that in the last fifteen years.

Could it be that there is a problem not only with individual artists, but also with cultural life and the public sphere, which has not quite been too free or democratic since the “regime change”, either?

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Since the dictatorship in Hungary was far from as harsh and violent as in Czechoslovakia, the GDR or Romania, we hardly had any opposition artists who were as consciously political as those in the Soviet Union, for example, or those sympathetic to the Solidarity movement in Poland. Thankfully, they were under no threat like their Central European colleagues, they were given passports and the authorities were happy to have them out of the country. Nevertheless, they were not very concerned with directly political art that was discredited by social realism, except for Konkoly most of all among the exhibitors. But in fact, their friends, such as Erdély, Hajas, Szentjóby, Pauer and Major, were much more involved. Instead, their art was given a political overtone by the fact that they followed the “formalist tendencies fashionable in the West”, and by their friendship with members of the relatively free Hungarian political opposition. Oddly enough, the accusation of being in opposition thus entailed not only disadvantages, but also certain positive effects, raising their prestige both at home and abroad, not to mention the time that has passed since the regime change, during which their opposition friends have come into political positions.

The former schizophrenia of the end of the previous regime has now been replaced by a much more complex one: while their works are simultaneously purchased by the Western gallery owner, the Hungarian public collector, and more recently by the Hungarian art dealer who wants to tap into the capital accumulated by the Hungarian *nouveau-riche*, claiming “surefire” value, while they are supported by the Hungarian civil servant, the state curator, the expert art historian who developed their former image, and while most recently, relying on their social prestige acquired in the manner explained above, they are trying to win over the potential clientele of Hungarian and foreign financial institutions, banks and corporations; they keep complaining about the Western gallery owner because he or she no longer appreciates their former political piquancy, about the state official because he or she does not support them in accordance with their importance, and to the *nouveau riche* class of bankers and dealers because they are not yet enlightened enough to accommodate them.

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Therefore, the contradictions stemmed from the circumstances of the attempt to catch up with Western art, because it was done with the help of the state, and thus exclusively and with a very unidirectional, tendentious painting.<sup>4</sup> The most negative domestic consequence of the latter was that in Hungary, for a long time, postmodernism was identified, too narrowly, with the rather soft, decorative, eclectic-sensible Hungarian variant of new painting. This obstructed the unfolding of much broader, more complex postmodern artistic possibilities, which were freer and politically more radical, and

4 Discriminative thinking has a long tradition even within the avant-garde artistic tradition; it is almost part of the operating principle of our twentieth-century art that an ‘authoritative’ artist (Kassák, Kondor, Erdély), group or style has almost always been selected, to which everyone had to conform, otherwise they would be excluded from art life as outmoded, dilettantes or fools. In the eighties, it was the new painters organised by Lóránd Hegyi who formed this mandatory and exclusive reference group, and the unhealthy privilege did them no good either.

as such, perhaps more acceptable in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>5</sup> (The general perception of art history now classifies all post-minimal art movements that have been disillusioned with the utopias of the avant-garde into this category.) Hungarian art adopted the post-modern strategy in a one-sided, provincial manner, concentrating on a single (traditional) medium, and even then with a huge compromise, perhaps adapted to Hungarian political conditions, and representing a more sensual, softer, more playful, decorative, frivolous version within new painting. This Hungarian variant was closer to the Italian and French aspirations and to the not so impetuous and political Heftige Malerei, such as Polke, Richter, Kiefer, or the Americans, Schnabel or Haring, and thus the values ignored were precisely those that have been considered most worthy of preservation from this movement in contemporary painting. Apart from one or two exceptions, this Hungarian “new painting”, which can be seen here, has never been modernised, verified, falsified or confronted with “newer painting”, for example with the new abstractionists of New York or with post-conceptualist and other developments.

But their adoption of postmodernism was also superficial in the sense that, while they broke with the avant-garde in their rejection of communal utopias, subjectivism, allusion techniques, playfulness and eclecticism, they retained group tradition in terms of its character as a movement, and in essence they oscillate between the **avant-garde attitude and post-avant-garde theory and painting**. In response to the challenges of the Western European art market that had suddenly opened up, they sought to balance the formally rigorous and intellectually concentrated character of their avant-garde artistic past with the monumental scale, easy intelligibility and frivolous formal play fashionable in Western galleries. Thus, a unique, half neo-, half trans-avant-garde stylistic blend was created, in which, adhering to the Central European image, they preserved the outwardly deconstructed fragments of avant-garde forms and aesthetics, but extracted their hidden spiritual and utopian charge. Meanwhile, they also sought to preserve the intellectual image of the militant vanguard in their public roles. In doing so, **a jumble of avant-garde and non-avant-garde values arose around them**. They had already incorporated avant-garde values in their early ideology as emerging postmodernist painters; in Hegyi and Birkás’s interpretation, they presented a vision of a tragically personal painting that confronted the world and carried on the theory of abstract expressionism.<sup>6</sup> Which seemed valid for a while, even if its strategic-aesthetic outcome seemed dubious by our earlier standards. But the tension of the painterly language gradually subsided: the subjective and material realms torn by intellectual doubt and emotional tension arising from the undertaking of painting were replaced by cool elegance, monumental gallery-scale dimensions, classically serene and boring balanced pictorial formulas, almost sacral-sublime monochrome textures and stubbornly repeated symbols of unity, cool geometric formulas, elegantly frozen gestures, allusions and figures. There is no longer any

5 Indeed, it seems that the artists who have permanently risen from Central and Eastern Europe to the ‘pinnacle’ of world fame – Abakanowicz, Abramović, Yankilevsky, Jetelová, Kabakov, etc. – almost all work in the genres of postmodern installation and performance, not painting.

6 Instead of instinctively undertaking to paint out of their natural human desires, they began to ideologize their ‘spontaneous’ painterliness with avant-garde theories. In this way, they coated their supposedly liberated, instinctive painting in a gloomy, moralising, militant ideological veneer of completely opposite meaning, which corroded their painting, even if for a time this tension gave them positive energy. It is typical that the two par excellence painters in this generation, Csernus and Lakner, who simply loved to paint without ideology, moved to the West and continue to paint “happily” to this day. Among the painters who remained at home and converted from the avant-garde, there is still a strange sense of guilt to this day about professing the sensual beauty of painting.



trace of the ambiguity and frivolous playfulness vociferously proclaimed by the original theory. Although their paintings imitate the “great form” and “great style” that even Cézanne failed to perfect, with one or two exceptions they have fallen into the academic cul-de-sac of an aestheticizing, conceptually and intellectually weakened formal painting left over from the hollowed-out trans-avant-garde. And this brings us to the more purely art-historical question, to further problems of artistic strategy, contemporaneity, and relation to the avant-garde.

Consistency and Europeanism are the two cornerstones of the group's ethos, self-esteem and strategy today. The members of the group are extremely proud of the fact that for the last 10-15 years, they have been following a “path” they have paved themselves, an individual, perchance a “distinctly Central-Eastern European” style, their gaze fixed straight in front of them. In my opinion, however, this is a latent, consolidated and presentable offspring of avant-garde reductivism, wherein the puritanism of the avant-garde has been replaced by over-polished forms in endless monumental repetition, and its radicalism aimed at the transformation of society by the Greenbergian, “late modern”, aristocratic profession of art above reality. These ever-narrower one-way paths may have helped to navigate and survive the jungle of the end of the previous regime, but they are unable to explore, to discover, to know the world that has opened up enormously since the regime change.

And behind the Iparterv group's constant reference to Europe arising from their exclusive ties to the German cultural market, I sense a subconscious conservative isolation, which is a refusal to take into account the latest developments in multicultural world art outside Europe. And there is also a lurking illusion that the “West”, which no longer exists, is preserving not only the lost humanist ideals, but also the special status that their former position of the Eastern European opposition artist, once a curiosity, conferred on them.

The schizoid situation I am analysing may be the reason for the fact that their careers had never undergone a natural, **healthy transition** and evolution<sup>7</sup> from the avant-garde to the post-avant-garde without complexes. Additionally, that the positive values, the critical attitude of the avant-garde, their openness to society acidity, self-reflection and self-irony was never transferred into their postmodern activity, while these qualities make the recent work of such classical masters of the neo-avant-garde as Bruce Nauman or Denis Oppenheim so alive, authentic and interesting.<sup>8</sup> In this way, a rupture, a break occurred in their oeuvres; they have remained avant-garde in their ideology, at least as far as their public discourse is concerned, they adhere to their oppositional image, they see themselves as the vanguard of artistic progress, of social critique, while their painting has conformed to the aestheticized vernacular of post-avant-garde galleries. Apart from one or two completely hollowed-out exceptions, all of them make highly sophisticated, slow, incrementally constructed, aesthetic, sometimes intellectually profound or sensually engaging paintings and sculptures. What is missing in most of them is that moving, subversive force that confronts us with ourselves, our existence and the world, which we could still feel in Hungarian art in its best moments at the end of the seventies. Perhaps the disappearance of the

7 Kim Levin writes in her essay *Farewell to Modernism* (Kim Levin, “Farewell to Modernism,” *Arts Magazine* 54 (1979).) about the coexistence of the modern and the postmodern, about the fact that they are not necessarily in sharp contrast to each other, but that a consensus, an inner continuity is possible between them.

8 Of course, they too went through this with great shocks, great silences and often unevenly. In Hungary, Imre Bukta was almost the only artist to make a natural transition from the language of the avant-garde in the global sense to a sort of post-avant-garde, precisely because of his long-lasting marginal position.



political attitude that would in principle follow naturally from their avant-garde traditions, their indifference to the serious social transformations of the present, and to the cultural problems of Central and Eastern Europe, is the most striking sign of the loss of their contemporariness.

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Does art have a task? Does the critic have a task? Is the notion of the autonomous, aestheticizing or, conversely, the former, political “Central and Eastern European” artist who reflects on reality tenable? Or do we need to step outside all our traditional notions of art in order to be authentic in today’s situation of “catching up” with Europe? These are the questions that the current far from heroic social transformations and the Hungarian art scene, which could not care less about this situation, raise for me. And these are the questions that the painters now representing Hungary consistently fail to ask.

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At this stage, their art is not connected to the discourse of contemporary painting, but rather takes elements of the post-pop, op-art, hard edge, minimal and monochrome of the sixties and seventies, or the trans-avant-garde, new-expressionist painting of the eighties, in an often highly sophisticated, but, for me, too conformist and slightly unproblematic direction. That, in itself, would not be a problem. I see the problem more in the fact that the older generation fails to reflect on the very steps that follow logically and consistently from, or, conversely, attack in the most vitriolic tone, the aforementioned trends that they have followed throughout their careers to date. I particularly regret that our masters do not reflect on the achievements of artists who use geometric abstraction, pop art and monochrome in the most sophisticated manner, but at the same time in an uninhibited way and with self-irony, such as Peter Haley, who cannot be dismissed as a theorist, either, or Ross Bleckner, Philip Taaffe and others. Nor do they reflect on anyone else.

Of course, I do not expect our parents’ generation to respond to each new phenomenon by threatening to give themselves up and, say, abandon painting and start making political art on the Internet. But I find it unacceptable that they do not engage in dialogue with new developments in art, that they do not confront and modernise their painting in that dialogue. And conversely, that they do not confront the aspirations of the present with the values they represent. I can, in fact, conceive of a contemporary painting and sculpture that reflects on these new developments on a high intellectual level, critically and self-critically, ironically and self-ironically.

Although the isolation of more than forty years has lessened, the almost tragic insufficiency of information, the insularity resulting from the anti-democratic tradition and the lack of information, the former dividedness and politicisation of the art scene, the mindset that thinks in terms of exclusivism – painting or installation, European or American orientation, national or cosmopolitan approach – have partly remained.

In parallel with the apathy of Hungarian society as a whole, it is not only the older generation of our earlier avant-garde artists who seem jaded. What is even sadder is that even young people – who were also socialised in the late socialist regime and were taught to respect authority in schools – often conform and adapt to a system that thinks in terms of hierarchies, and the ever-weaker, but still existing privileges of a group of the older generation demoralise them and encourage conformism and softness.

After a few scholarships and exhibitions abroad, “earned” by a few years of intensive work, they often wind down, as many are unable to cope with the success, and even in the generation of thirty-somethings, there already are false starts and prematurely aged careers. In the absence of up-to-date intellectual movements and a

real market, generational shifts had not taken place for a long time, generations had blurred together – as we have seen with Iparterv and Rabinext – had not been articulated. This lack of articulation is one of the reasons why we see a mass of half-trodden paths, classicisations and fragmented oeuvres in every generation. The point is, however, that young people do not quite realise that it is up to them to make or break the situation, that they/we have been given the opportunity and the duty to either create a genuinely democratic art scene and build on it a contemporary art of global standards, or else everything remains as it is, with all its privileges and provincialism.

**Personal comments.** The Hungarian art scene is showing signs of stagnation, of slowing down. There is no stimulating, open dialogue and discourse between generations and groups, which is what makes world art so exciting. It is possible that I have had to make some painfully critical remarks, inappropriate for a catalogue preface, about artists who taught me as a teenager what real art is and whom I still respect today. But we cannot afford the luxury of treating their oeuvre and their orientation as once and for all closed, of letting them rest on their laurels and not asking for their opinion on the changes of the present. Perhaps it has also become clear that I am not in dispute with specific individuals and artistic qualities, but rather, in a polarised way, I was speaking to a tendency that manifests itself in different ways and to different depths in each of them. I must also admit that, individually, I see in almost every one of them a lot of values that I feel are acceptable, worthy of consideration, worthy of discussion, or even of love. But I cannot accept any kind of privilege or nimbus that narrows down art, associated with any specific group or style, because the dominance of any style or group makes the whole of Hungarian art provincial, boring and out of date.

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# ARCHIPELAGO, LINK, TROLL. ART CRITICISM TODAY<sup>1</sup>

(SHORTENED)

We are witnesses to a “third wave,” another momentous revaluation within the field of art criticism after the year 2000.

Just before the summer break, I was asked to join in a panel discussion held as part of Krakers, i.e. the Kraków Art Week. The debate that bore the title “Nie lubię!” [I Dislike!] centred on the current condition of art criticism (participants included Anna Czaban, Stach Szabłowski, Andrzej Szczerski and the undersigned, the event was moderated by Piotr Sikora). Before we knew it, we were talking about what turned out to be the crux of our discussion: why, after a burst of energy that lasted several years, had criticism sunk into lethargy once more? And, perhaps more importantly, why is this happening in an era of new media: blogs, but also Facebook, Twitter, etc.?

It doesn't take much to see that the above conclusion is merely an impression, but a meaningful one as “hard” facts show. Art criticism today is present in mainstream media (dailies, weeklies), specialist journals, and on the web which includes social media. New initiatives appear, while the established ones undergo transformations: we have *Gablota Krytyki*, the “new” *Arteon* with its liberal-turned-conservative chief editor, new blogs, *dwutygodnik.com*, the old-new *Obieg* and Facebook chats. Yet there persists a sense of inertia and slackness, the irrelevance of consecutive critical essays and the nonexistence of thought-provoking discussions loom large. Also for the panellists who had a hard time trying to name something of note they had recently encountered in criticism (after much hesitation I opted for the new initiatives: *Gablota Krytyki* and the new profile of *Arteon*, while Stach Szabłowski chose Łukasz Gorczyca and Łukasz Ronduda's novel *W połowie puste*). The moderator and the audience, on the other hand, readily communicated their basic observation: criticism has stagnated. Speaking for myself, I could feel a degree of disappointment mostly on the part of the public, which was made up, amongst others, by quite a few art critics. Moderator Piotr Sikora sought remedies in new forms of expression at their disposal: vlogs and instant messaging.

1 The text was originally published in Jakub Banasiak, “Archipelag, link, troll. Krytyka artystyczna dzisiaj,” *Dwutygodnik*, no. 92, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/3996-archipelag-link-troll--krytyka-dzisiaj.html>.

As such I am now going to discuss my own conclusions and observations; the problem is not what medium a critic uses. It has never been. The reason why *Raster* continued to retain its appeal was not that it was printed on paper, and then moved to the web; similarly, the critical energy generated by the first-wave blogs and the rebirth of *Obieg* after its discontinuance ten years earlier, as *obieg.pl* was not due to the fact that they operated online, just as the mediocrity of mediocre art magazines does not come from using the printing press for their production. Criticism is either good or bad, full stop. Printed or uploaded, an essay stirring vital tensions is bound to trigger reaction. It is not that art critics shy away from vlogging or twittering, it is that they are at a loss for words when expected to describe the artistic *status quo*. Yet this is not only a decline in the quality of criticism at all! I believe this is not a minor issue, being related to the very structure of art criticism and, correspondingly, to a “state of mind,” or “critical awareness” that is typical of our times. And here indeed the medium – the Internet – is of fundamental importance, but not quite in the way suggested by Sikora.

Very few of the blogs set up in 2005-6 have survived. Whenever those still online have a number of posted entries that are small, but not terribly small, these tend to be off-the-cuff remarks, pearls of wisdom, pasted press releases, or even single images. Of the *Obieg* blogs there remains one, Iza Kowalczyk’s *Straszna sztuka*, which – after a rather long break – is consistently receiving updates. Alive and kicking only recently, *Gablota Krytyki* has regrettably been running out of steam without a single consequential text having been uploaded there for a long time. And hence we arrive at the first inescapable conclusion: despite the fact that, as observed before, periodicals, blogs, Facebook profiles and such like are legion and polyphonic, they have failed to energise art-critical discourse, hampering it instead.

The thesis I am advancing here is that the “third wave” is at hand, another momentous revaluation within the field of art criticism after the year 2000, the first being marked by the appearance of the website *raster.art.pl*, the second by blogs and *Obieg* going digital, while the third has brought about an “archipelagoisation” of utterances and the flattening of discourse. Polyphony has been superseded by an archipelago encompassing an array of autonomous isles of equal importance. Democratisation and the evolution of the Internet have transformed text into link – a link to Dorota Jarecka’s article originally published in the main section of the *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily, a link to a blog entry, or a link to a Facebook event. The opposition between “traditional” and “new” media, quite distinct during the first wave of blogging, has disappeared. To put it bluntly: having absorbed traditional media, the Internet has made them equivalent to browser windows; Eryk Mistewicz points out that every attempt at restricting access to the content of print magazines and newspapers is doomed to fail: “At a recent tech conference, Don Graham, the publisher of *The Washington Post*, devoted a lot of time to explaining why models denying content should be seen a step backwards, not forwards, projects of a bygone era.” As democratic as it gets, the Internet where a link is a link values content above all, scraping the patina of nobility and importance off the “old” media. We visit random websites in search of specific information or author.

Interestingly, this process went unnoticed by the bloggers gathered around *Obieg* (or have they, like the author of this text, shifted the focus of their professional attention elsewhere?), but also by the new generation of critics who strive to follow the footsteps of their older colleagues, apparently oblivious to the fact that the world they live in is nothing like it was before.

Every theorist of new technologies will tell you that six years on the Internet is eternity. Take, for instance, blogger Karolina Plinta who is bending over backwards to cause a commotion, relentlessly publishing all sorts of content including jpgs and animations, memes and copious links, insults and polemics, self-deprecating and witty; in a nutshell: screaming with every fibre of her being: “Hello! I’m after an argument! Join in, I know you’re there! Let’s talk about art, for goodness’ sake!” All she gets is... utter silence. Today’s art criticism is a chain of autonomous isles, ghettos within which particular critics impart whatever it is they want to impart: newspaper critics deliver their lines, critics associated with the mainstream art world theirs, “independent” critics theirs, the “second tier” theirs, the “excluded” theirs, *Obieg* theirs, and Karolina Plinta hers. Still, they are all merely the sum of links to specific texts, without an aptitude for sparking off disputes, founding school thoughts or, more than anything, starting a community.

Obviously, it is not that Plinta’s endeavours elicit no responses, but they are surely not of the kind she would like to receive, being more or less waspish, casual and exiguous remarks, with as little polemical potential as possible. I used to complain about the quality of comments that appeared under the entries on my blog *Krytykant*, but I admit to missing them today: discussions that lasted for days with several dozen in-depth posts by artists and fellow critics, all apt and to the point even if their phrasing was somewhat emotional... Am I getting older or did things actually used to be better? A glance at comments in today’s blogs suggests the latter is true.

This points to the next conclusion: this state of affairs is also a product of the new “archipelago” structure of art criticism. It takes time to get all sorts of things done online, leaving little of it for authors and their followers to engage in endless discussions on blogs. We tend to keep a dozen or so bookmarks open (bank, newspaper, Facebook, work-related, texts waiting to be read, Wikipedia, browser...) and repeatedly refresh them. Refresh, refresh, refresh. Anything new? Nothing? Refresh! Mobile devices not far away: iPods, iPads, phones. Bloggers do this, and the readers of their potential critical essays do this. Switching from one text to another, they devote little time to one particular piece of writing. They don’t have the time to actually read it. This is why no bridges of debate connect the islands of the archipelago and, for want of contemplation, there is nothing to accumulate in the form of theoretical reflection. What there is, though, is the scourge of ‘linkisation’, an illusion of polyphony. Links keep coming, their numbers making it impossible for a person to take them all in, they never stop coming... Of course, the prime culprit is to be identified as Facebook, an invention as convenient as it is time-consuming. Try calculating how much time you need to view your wall, share some pics from your Instagram account, say “hello,” like other people’s posts, etc. This is the time that could be used for writing a substantive comment on an entry.

Originally, the Internet appeared to represent the power of communication, but we seem to be past the point of reaching critical mass; the Net has grown to stand for the power of alienation, a separation of virtual as well as real-life beings. Having 765 “friends” on Facebook is as delusive as a “discussion” on art reduced to odd sentences, epithets, and monosyllabic replies. Having discussed archipelagoisation and linkisation, we have arrived at “trollisation”, the practice of commenting on everything in a trivial and shameless way. A prime example is provided by the website *natemat.pl*, where comments are synchronised with Facebook, meaning that all users are known by name, while their profiles are easily accessible. And? Well, nothing changes. It turns out that – completely counter-intuitively – people are capable of writing all things imbecilic about every topic under the sun without ever feeling uneasy about



it. Just to have their say, however “witty” or biting, to pick apart whatever claim the author is making, or simply to “like” it. The abyssal space of linguistic remnants is nowadays called “discussion.” “The article has provoked a discussion.” Again: oh, the golden era of *Obieg* comments! Anonymous (like in numerous “old” forums such as, for instance, *Gazeta.pl*), true, but so much more to the point.

Am I going overboard? Well, the thing is that subjects hotly debated by art critics today, matters undergoing eager exploration and issues stimulating intense discussions remain to be revealed to me. Who is progressive, who is conservative, who is setting the tone – is there anywhere I can access their articles? Even the Seventh Berlin Biennale, curated by Artur Żmijewski, in theory the “hottest” event on the Polish art scene for quite some time – has failed to provoke polemics, debates, or arguments. It was only five years ago that a single piece of writing, not to mention famous books or exhibitions (for instance Żmijewski’s *Repetition*), could ignite discussion.

Don’t get me wrong: I am not saying that art criticism is dead and gone; what I am saying is that there are no points of intersection for it. Expectedly, BB7 received a usual set of more or less predictable reviews. And? That was it. It is not that there are no texts. Texts are there, a steady flow of texts – only they appear for a flicker of a moment before vanishing in the abyss of the Internet. Like a meme, like a Facebook post.

So, here we are with an archipelago made up of separate isles of art criticism where everyone is linking until they can link no more, but nobody is actually talking to anyone – they may type some sort of reply between viewing a website and refreshing Facebook at most. The archipelago or the illusion of polyphony, trolls or the illusion of discussion, links or the illusion of discourse. Here comes the missing content again: the profound lack of content doesn’t boil down to the Internet (admittedly, some islands in the archipelago have more substance than others). It is we – consumers of the Internet, potential authors and readers of critical texts – who alienate ourselves, click before we think, replace the exchange of opinions with the exchange of links. There is no “Facebook criticism” – just as there has never been “blog criticism.” There is only good and bad criticism. Criticism today ought to acknowledge that it has found itself on a crazy roller coaster moving at breakneck speed among other roller coasters at the same funfair, but even so there is a way out. After all, we are all on the roller coaster, regardless of what we do for a living.

Another result of “archipelagoisation” should be pointed out within this context, the lack of a platform for the entire community of critics to communicate on, once provided by *Obieg* and *obieg.pl* (which has since been devoured by children of the revolution it fomented). I don’t mean any sort of a hegemonic “centre” or another dominant power, I am simply observing that every discussion needs a moderator. Alas, in an era of self-sufficiency and ideological polarisation of particular online (meaning all) beings, this seems next to impossible. Might it be that we will “return to where we have come from” and debates will once again be triggered by critics’ books – essays and manifestos, which will sound pure against the background of the Internet row? I’m afraid this is my wishful thinking, rather than a forecast. One thing is for sure: as long as critics and readers don’t clear for themselves a piece of shared ground, art criticism will be marked by the threesome: archipelago, link, and troll.



ON ART BEFORE 1989

# BEYOND MODERNISM. NEW GENERATIONS AND SHIFTS IN PERSPECTIVE IN THE HUNGARIAN ART OF THE 1990s<sup>1</sup>

## Three Pillars and a Fourth

Towards the mid-eighties, the construction of an art historical and theoretical bridge was brought to its finish to let Hungarian Modernism finally cross over to the long desired “opposite bank,” where the institutions created for the preservation, handling and marketing of one-time avant-garde and modernist values loomed large. The construction stood on four pillars – on the three short “golden periods” of the Hungarian avant-garde tradition, and on a contemporary trend, as an additional fourth one: 1.) Activism, Dadaism and (most importantly) Constructivism: the art of the Kassák circle from the end of the nineteen tens to the mid-twenties, but especially the period between 1920-1925; 2.) Surrealism and non-figurative art: the so-called European School,<sup>2</sup> along with the trends expressed in the activities of the groups organized by the ex-Bauhaus member, Ernő Kállai, from the end of the thirties to the end of the forties, but especially between 1945-1949, in the short period of bourgeois consolidation following the Second World War; 3.) Neo-avant-garde – Hard Edge, Pop Art, new ways of Figurative painting: in the sixties, especially between 1966-1969, the expanding of trends which manifested themselves in the IPARTERV and Szürenon exhibitions;<sup>3</sup> 4.) Transavantgarde, New Painting – the phenomenon and concomitant phenomena of “New Sensibility”: the movement created from the fusion of the Neo-avant-garde of the sixties and the generation whose members began their careers two decades later; the national and international exhibitions

1 The text was originally published in: Gábor András, “A modernizmuson túl. Generáció és szemléletváltás a kilencvenes évek magyar művészetében / Beyond Modernism. New Generations and Shifts in Perspective in the Hungarian Art of the 90’s,” in *Omnia Motantur, XXVII Venice Biennale*, ed. Katalin Néray (1997), 13-16. Translated by Zsófia Bán.

2 The group of artists working between 1946-1948, which stressed and demonstrated the European orientation of Hungarian art, and which organized exhibitions and issued art-publications.

3 IPARTERV was an institute for architectural design in Budapest which housed two retrospective exhibitions of Hungarian neo-avant-garde trends, in 1968 and 1969. Szürenon: the term coined by the contraction of the words ‘Surrealism’ and ‘non-figuration’. The group of artists which represented avantgarde trends parallel to the IPARTERV group organized their first exhibition under that name in 1969.

conceptualized first and foremost by Lóránd Hegyi, organized in the eighties, but especially between 1984–1988.

The succession of these “golden periods” corresponds approximately to the undulation of generational changes that George Kubler writes about in his book called *The Shape of Time*.<sup>4</sup> It was a characteristic trait of the Hungarian situation that – up to the end of the eighties – the generational “overlaps” that developed in the historical continuity of Modernism did not present themselves as conflicts between the different generations. The frontline, the “line of fire” stretched between the official public sphere of any given period (its structure, its characters and those seeking contact with them) and between the un-official counter-sphere which protested against and was opposed to all of this, and which continued the tradition of the avant-garde. For this reason, as a gesture of solidarity, the art events organized by the latter were characterized by the demonstrative presence of the established artists as well as that of the emerging ones who were often representatives of largely different mentalities, both from the point of view of style and artistic approach. These group exhibitions reinforced not only the continuing process of the avantgarde, but also its organic development from the same root and its (self)consciousness. While the movement was more and more dominated by the principle formulated by Kállai in the middle of the century – “Not that which separates, but that which unites” – and by a kind of tolerance<sup>5</sup>, the assessment of unlike, outsider phenomena were characterized by the inverse, i.e. by (reciprocal) mistrust and disclaiming.

However, the mid-eighties brought a turning-point: the social context and the official evaluation of Modernism changed, bringing about the simultaneous disintegration of that double – aesthetic and ethical – shell structure which until that time had kept the paradigm of the avantgarde strictly enclosed in a kind of mythical bubble.

All this was preceded by a short, transitory period lasting for only a few years’ time: a period of uncertainty and total ideological disintegration in the cultural policy that had been dominant until then.<sup>6</sup> Those new, young cadres – young artists who were leading personalities of the Young Artists’ Studio manoeuvring between the triangle of the Academy of Fine Arts, the institution that distributed work and practiced censorship, known as the Lectorate and the Artists’ Federation, and who were officially considered “modern” and “progressive” and at the same time “intact” from the influence of avant-garde circles. They were selected as replacements for the old representative figures that turned out as failures in spite of their support from critics, their officially

4 Kubler determines the “general time-span of a generation” – based on the four, approximately equal sections in the sixty years of an average human’s creative period (preparation, early works, maturity, late maturity) – in fifteen years. In: George Kubler, *The Shape of Time* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1962).

5 “The art that was created in such enclosed spaces was, not insignificantly, a demonstration of intellectual opposition and as such it articulated not its internal differences and variegated dimensions, but strived to attain some kind of unity, or at least an ethical unity. Ethical and aesthetic values were easily merged in Hungarian art during the Kádár regime. The noticing, not to speak of the mentioning of fluctuations in quality in the individual oeuvres was something simply not done: the artistic production of those who were morally ready to stand in opposition to the official world was not subject to serious criticism by the unofficial, second public sphere.” Éva Forgács, “A valóság fogalmának változása a 80-as évek magyar művészetében,” in *A modern poszt-jai. Esszék, tanulmányok, dokumentumok a 80-as évek magyar művészetéről. Németh Lajos emlékére, 65. születésnapján*, ed. Katalin Keserü (Budapest: ELTE BTK, 1994), 16–17.

6 “The Helsinki Convention forced the leaders of the country to create at least the illusion of acceptability, as a consequence of which official reality and real reality started to converge. Just as they tacitly had to acknowledge that the country could only be sustained by the black economy, they also had to realize that in the case of cultural issues they could rely often only on the unofficial public sphere. The official sphere [...] wanted the West to regard it as tolerant, and in order to create that illusion it was forced to make some real concessions and to practice a certain amount of real tolerance.” Ibid., 21.

managed international relationships and catalogues printed in the West. Their presence in the Western-European art scene either proved to be transitory, or they were able to establish themselves only on a very modest, at best mediocre, commercial level.

### The Paradox of “New Sensibility”

A vacuum was thus created which the new Hungarian painting was ready to fill in. This new painting was represented by those referred to as the “New Sensibility” group which at that time had already been establishing itself for several years (approximately during the same period the events mentioned above took place), and which had already proved its talent in a number of solo and collective exhibitions. By “being ready” I mean that they fulfilled two basic conditions: first of all, the artists were “new” given the fact that the previous cultural policy had, for almost two decades, driven them into the sphere of the unofficial counter-forums, and at the same time had “infantilized” this Neo-Avant-garde generation then in their fifties (official criticism referred to them as “young, experimenting artists” even in the late seventies). Moreover, most of these artists (e.g.: Imre Bak, Ákos Birkás, Tamás Hencze, István Nádler) did indeed make a “new” kind of impression if compared with their earlier work, as the beginning of the eighties brought a radical turning-point in their careers. Besides these artists, the ones freshly out of art school, who were two or three decades younger than those mentioned above, were new beyond any doubt: András Bernát, József Bullás, István Mazzag, László Mulasics and their peers. I shall return to the problem of the generation wedged in between the ones mentioned so far. In the “New Sensibility” exhibitions, the representatives of this generation were László Fehér, El Kazovsky, Károly Kelemen, András Koncz and Tamás Soós. Finally, there was also the theory of “New Sensibility” developed by Hungarian art historian and art critic Lóránd Hegyi, in the form of exhibition openings, forewords to catalogues and eventually a book in which, while reflecting on the changes that were taking place in the international art scene, he also made efforts to adapt this theory to the Hungarian context.<sup>7</sup> It was this kind of fresh production and new theory that gave momentum to the Hungarian “transition in art,” which preceded the subsequent transition in politics by more than half a decade. “New Sensibility” appeared – quite unexpectedly for those occupying strategic positions until then – in the leading institutions of the official public sphere: at the Ernst Museum belonging to the Múcsarnok / Kunsthalle [Exhibition Hall] (*Wet Paint*, 1984); at the Budapest Gallery (*New Sensibility III*, 1985); at the Hungarian National Gallery (*Eclecticism '85*, 1986) and finally, at the most important forum of international contemporary art, the Hungarian pavilion of the Venice Biennial (*Bak-Birkás-Kelemen-Nádler*, 1986).

The paradox of “New Sensibility” is that although its theory attempted to coordinate the aesthetic answers given to the “crisis of Modernism”, those phenomena which could be classified as such remained in the context of politicized activism (i.e. the context of the “movement”) inherited from the seventies, until the above mentioned “transition in art” that took place in the late eighties became consolidated to some

7 “We use the category of ‘New Sensibility’ as a generic term for all those phenomena which, in opposition to certain trends of the seventies like the analytic, reductivist, conceptualist and expansionist trends, or those that created abstract models, or concentrated on media research, and on the principle of structure or technology, based the act of creating art on the aesthetic liberation and creation of the self, on the motif of dialogue with cultural history, on the sensuous-concrete-expressive individuality of the work of art, on the impersonation of ‘cultural metaphor’ and on the intensity of the individual experience of being.” Lóránd Hegyi, “Foreword to Fourth New Sensibility Exhibition,” in *New Sensibility IV* (Pécs: Pécsi Galéria, 1987). See also: —, *Új szenszibilitás* (Budapest: Magvető, 1983), Exh. cat.; —, *Avantgarde és transzavantgarde* (Budapest: Magvető, 1986), Exh. cat.; and more recently —, *Alexandria* (Budapest: Jelenkor, 1995).

extent. This context of political activism comprehended two kinds of conflicts, a traditional one and a new one: on the one hand, it provoked the unconcealed dislike and resistance of the slowly awakening official sphere, while on the other, it brought forth the critique and self-distancing of former “fellow combatants” who were now developing their oeuvres independently of the “New Sensibility” school. “New Sensibility”, which according to its theory represented art “after the avant-garde”, could not step over its own shadow: its critique of Modernism remained ineffectual, its ideology – despite the professional argumentation and sober tone – had the effect of a manifesto, and the movement – in true avant-garde style – became more and more expansive. Its quick successes made it attractive, and the number of artists who participated in the exhibitions organized by this school increased steadily. Moreover, it created the illusion of international intellectual and economic integration with the feverish bustle of trips abroad and exchange exhibitions that left, in their wake, problems and doubts in self-appraisal. As if foreseeing events to come, Géza Perneczky (Hungarian art historian living in Germany) wrote the following in 1983: “These guest exhibitions which shake hands with each other over the infamous borders separating East and West, and also North and South, do not influence prices and have no effect, on either side, on artistic creation; their role does not go beyond that of protocol.” However, the process stopped around 1986-88; its initial vigor gave momentum to a limited circle whose effect can be felt to this day, while the majority which supported and legitimized the movement in its initial, developing stage suddenly found itself in a vacuum. They were forced to revise their work and to make a solitary, and many a time tough “new start.”

### **The Hungarian “Mainstream”**

The relatively quick winding down of the trend known as “New Sensibility” does not go against the fact of its having contributed to the construction of the fourth pillar mentioned above, and thus the mainstream of Hungarian elite art gradually started to take shape. The political transition helped legitimize the revision of old evaluations and the forming of new ones in the history of art: the force lines were rearranged; in the programs and publications of exhibiting institutions, the stress shifted to phenomena which until then had been either “tolerated” or “prohibited.”<sup>8</sup> This somewhat belatedly defined mainstream – whose “building” came to its finish just when constructions of a similar sort (albeit ones naturally developed under different circumstances) were being deconstructed in other parts of the world, that is, just when the first dangerous cracks were being detected on the bastion of Modernism – was nevertheless a strong creation of high quality. The best Hungarian artists, art historians, theorists and critics contributed to it for long decades – in spite of the disapproval of the political elite – offering their creative powers, their professional knowledge, their moral stance and their love of art. The image thus developed – reflecting Hungarian modernism’s interpretation of itself – became the image of the self for the avantgarde, but especially for the neo-avant-garde starting out in the sixties; it reflected the latter generation’s (artists, art theorists and art organizers) own narrative of cultural history and their placement in time. The revealing and characteristically amalgam-like key category of this narrative is the notion of greatness, in which the merits of the heroic past (oppositional public sphere, bans, protests) mesh inseparably with aspects of aesthetic commitment (to universal trends) and individual invention (“quality”).

8 Reference to three categories in Hungarian cultural history used especially during the 50s and 60s, known as “the three Ts”: *tűrt, tiltott, támogatott* (meaning: tolerated, prohibited and supported – i.e., by governmental policy). [Translator’s note].

### A New “Reading”

The real turning point came in the very beginning of the nineties. The shifts in perspective which until that time had invariably been expressed on an ethical and/or art political plane (or more precisely: in the point of intersection formed by these planes) now started to define themselves as generational conflicts. A new generation of artists, art historians and curators appeared – most of whom had already started their careers at the end of the eighties – who either did not accept the logic and set of values propagated by the newly legitimated mainstream, or regarded it from the outset as a historical formation, and acknowledged largely different points of orientation in the past as well as in the contemporary scene. A new “reading” was created in which the variegated and flexible preferences allowing for parallelisms and contradictions no longer established a normative system and an aesthetic canon.

This is where I return to the problem of those who are currently in their forties. The splits within this generation wedged in between the “old ones” and the “young ones” is a special concomitant of the generational change and shifts in perspective that took place in Hungarian art: some of them – already mentioned above – joined the old avant-garde artists at the *New Sensibility* exhibitions (at the time as ‘almost young artists’), while others (Imre Bukta, András Böröcz, Pál Gerber, Balázs Kicsiny, Gábor Roskó, Valéria Sass) immediately took a path that diverged from the mainstream, and are now making contacts with those who started their careers five to ten years later, at the turn of the eighties and nineties.

The shift in perspective made it possible for everything that, looking down from the bridge of the mainstream, had seemed to be but a muddy swirl, a swelling flow carrying along all kinds of things indiscriminately, to finally articulate and recognize itself after having touched land. Besides the mainstream’s container of references filled already to the brim (all sorts of publications, catalogues, books, unending exhibition lists and collection registers), alternative basic researches were being launched: phenomena which until then had been looked down on and considered unfit for elite art, subcultural and marginal, were finally making themselves heard and becoming important factors. “The reader of consecutivity,” i.e. the historian, stepping beyond the confines of the avant-garde and Modernism, started thereafter “to read synchronically, in simultaneity, as a musician reads an orchestral score” (Henri Focillon).

The basic feature of the new generation’s shift in perspective is that it left behind the kind of militant mentality which operated exclusively with sharply contrasted categories, ideological opposition, blows and counter-blows. In its eyes the “avant-garde” simultaneously ceased to be a value category and (from another perspective) a swear word; its emotional charge evaporated and it no longer provoked visceral reactions. Those polarities which had been handed down from one generation to the next, which had undermined artistic careers, consumed incredible amounts of energy, fuelled fierce antagonisms and which had fixated themselves as the schizoid features in the development of Hungarian art – such as “abstract” (meaning: non-figurative) versus “realist” (figurative); “official” versus “unofficial”; international versus “provincial” and vice versa: national versus “fashion conscious” – gradually lost their validity and their capacity to generate tension. By the same token, the romantic myth of the artist-hero gradually started to fade: the myth of an individual larger than life who struggles heroically with the material and tries to overcome dire circumstances, who stands above the ordinary and above the law. Its place was filled in by a cooler, more refrained, more rational or more personal relationship existing between the artist and art.



Another feature of this shift in attitudes was the totally pragmatic role given to art dealing, which the new approach rejected the illusions fostered in the eighties (namely, that there is a possibility for a large number of artists and gallery owners to reciprocally support each other, and that this may be seen as a kind of warranty for their professional advancement and existential security), along with anachronistic “avant-garde” gestures that condemned art dealing as such, and it sought to develop the framework of possible cooperation only after careful consideration of the given conditions and not relying on abstract premisses. Lastly, the forms of collective representation of interests eventually changed; instead of the earlier ongoing controversies between the different platforms representing various styles and ideologies, and instead of the programmatic movements, new organizations came into being that were ideologically neutral and were developed according to professional and generational motives.

Upon examining somewhat more closely the generation that provided the basis of the above analysed shift in perspective, it can be seen that its stratification is plurally structured, and that the representatives of parallel tendencies, or of those that occasionally intersected or even merged with each other, exhibited their works together only very sporadically and episodically. The exhibitions that were organized around various conceptions and which attempted to delineate clusters of certain phenomena did not become bastions of aesthetic faiths – even if, on occasion, they did offer a well-defined, clear-cut picture of the chosen segment.<sup>9</sup> The permeability and transparency of the basic aesthetic categories that surfaced throughout the art history of our century and which suddenly acquired currency, made the interpretation of works based on these traditional approaches and modes of categorization an impossible endeavour, but in any case, one of ephemeral validity. The openness and unexpected turns in (a large part of) the oeuvres prevent the development of exclusive groups based on normative criteria, and the curators themselves are wary of “programmatic” thinking in an age in which they see the role of the art ideologist as being untimely.

Another aspect of the art scene is the bustling activity of long – or short-lived self-managing groups of artists which have mushroomed spectacularly in the past decade, occasionally suspending their activities for several years. These groups, or artists who otherwise work on their own, occasionally cooperate for the sake of a joint project (mostly in jointly realized installations), or they organize collective exhibitions under names symbolizing the compatibility of the various personal artistic programs and works (Alkotárs, Block, “C”-group, Fű, MaMű, Pantheon, Túlsó Part, Újlak). This reaching out for each other and the subsequent collective appearances simultaneously relieve tension and produce another sort of gain: they channel attention to valuable territories which have been excluded from the mainstream.

<sup>9</sup> Without intending to offer a complete list: 1989 *Kék acél* [Blue Steel] (Budapest Gallery) and *Kék íron* [Blue Pencil] (Duna Gallery), and 1990 *Kék-Vörös* [Blue-Red] (Dunaújváros) – the first collective manifestations of the new generation, one strand of the alternative trends (“wry works”) *Unicornis* (Szentendre Gallery) – the other strand of alternative trends, the joint exhibition of members of the MaMű (Marosvásárhelyi Műhely [Marosvásárhely Workshop] and the Lajos Vajda Studio, 1991 *Szűk kapu* [Narrow Gate] (Budapest Gallery) – transcendent inspiration in contemporary Hungarian art *Emblematikus törekvések* [Emblematic Endeavors] (Budapest Gallery), 1992–1994 *Kortárs magyar epigon kiállítások I–III.* [Contemporary Hungarian Epigone Exhibitions] (Budapest – Hamburg), 1993 *A gondolat formái I–II.* [The Forms of Thought] (Óbudai Társaskör Gallery and Óbuda Cellar Gallery) – “sensual conceptuality” in contemporary Hungarian art, *Polifónia/Polyphony* (Budapest, Soros Center for Contemporary Arts) – Social Commentary in Contemporary Hungarian Art; site-specific works and installations, 1995 *Vízpróba/Water Ordeal* (Óbudai Társaskör Gallery and Óbuda Cellar Gallery) – a series of exhibitions of international women artists’ works, 1996 *The Least* (Exhibition of the Studio of Young Artist’s Association, Ernst Museum) – works based on minimalized conception.

### Conceptually Based Art

Generalizing for the sake of an overview, one could say that the events of the nineties are taking place between the two extreme points of an imaginary scale or, perhaps more expressively: between the two banks of a river-bed with constantly changing width and depth; they oscillate between fundamentally reflective, “sensitive and disciplined thinking” (Márta Kovalovszky) and instinctive, unrestrained, spontaneous forces lacking any sort of self-reflection. The first, which is a conceptually based art, is a very widely applied conception of form among the new generation. It offers the background for the most varied (and sometimes most traditional) techniques, forms of expression and media. Its stylistically disparate manifestations outline a form of art whose “appearance”, despite its conceptual roots and motivations, satisfies the criteria of par excellence, “true” art, be they drawings, paintings, sculptures, objects or environments which all stress their crafted objecthood and their sensuous materiality.<sup>10</sup> From a psychological point of view, one of the basic conditions of creating “sensual-conceptual” works is that there has to be a kind of (self)reflexive distance or reflexive “gap” between the work and its creator, as a consequence of which even the most basic techniques, the most primary modes of leaving painterly, personal traces lose their ingenuity and directness, and they will take on a sort of “medium consciousness.” We can see this expressed in graphic art, in the contradiction between and reconciliation of the notions of reproduction and uniqueness; in the reduction of elements in drawing, while at the same time preserving a personal tone; in the self-generating, on-going nature and the interminability of the work, and also in the construction of – frequently three-dimensional – installations (Lajos Csontó, Gyöngyi Gallusz, Tamás Kótai, Kamilla Szij). In the traditional oil-canvas works, new trails are being blazed in the use of monochrome and the modes of creating plastic surfaces. In addition, besides the trends that take steps beyond figurative, thematic representations whose followers conceal their true painterly motives and conceptual “riddles” in seemingly banal subjects (genre painting, landscape), we can witness the foregrounding of an approach, which interprets the painting as an object, an environmental factor (András Gál, Endre Koronczi, János Kósa, Éva Köves, Attila Szűcs).

Nevertheless, the appearance of the new generation put an end to Hungarian art’s traditional, staunch centeredness on painting. The strongest tendency detectable in a more and more dominant trend of thinking, that focuses primarily on site and three dimensionality, is to transfigure, to spiritualize the given space, to make it into an environment, an installation. Even the creators of more traditional sculptural works attempt to have their works develop a kind of contact not just with each other, but also with the given space. Thus, to have the whole of the exhibition create a homogeneous impression and emanate a site-specific atmosphere (Mária Chilf, Attila Menesi, Ágnes Szabics, Ottó Vincze and Ágnes Deli, Róza El-Hassan, Judit Hersko). The majority of these three-dimensional works are objects, object collages and assemblages. The used objects are infinitely varied; they can become part of a work of art no matter which sphere of civilization, culture or nature they may come from. One of the special, characteristic strands of the reflective-conceptualist trend is the activity of certain object and installation artists who use, now directly, now metaphorically or ironically, the systems of thought, the demonstrational techniques and tools borrowed from the natural sciences, from the field of physics, optics, mathematics, geometry and

10 Elaborated in: Gábor Andrási, “A gondolat formái,” *Nappali ház*, no. 2 (1993); —, “The Forms of Thought,” *Kontura*, no. 26 (1994). Katalin Keserü, ed., *A modern poszt-jai. Esszék, tanulmányok, dokumentumok a 80-as évek magyar művészetéről. Németh Lajos emlékére, 65. születésnapján* (Budapest: ELTE BTK, 1994).

mechanics. These works, which offer the viewers the joyful heuristic experience of having solved a riddle, a mystery, either use the “found objects” as readymades or, by way of careful crafting, prepare paraphrases of the tools used as models (Attila Csörgő, Balázs Faa, Gyula Július, Gyula Várnai).

### **The World of Objects**

One of the main characteristics of the Hungarian art of the nineties is the highly diversified and bold utilization of objects. The world of everyday objects, of things in themselves is that inexhaustible source, that vast territory where the creators of reflective-conceptualist works can meet with those characterized above as the other extreme, the opposite bank of the river, i.e. the artists who allow the spontaneous-direct energies to flow from their work. Their common source of inspiration is the world of objects, but while – continuing the previously quoted text by Kovalovszky – the former ones’ “gaze slides, like a fine, sharp scalpel, directly to the centre of the chosen problem,” the latter seek direct contact with the hidden, “immanent” powers of these objects, only to “bring forth” and “reveal” the found correspondences as already self-apparent, which revelation comes as a surprise even to themselves and which they are incapable of rationalizing (Tibor Bada, Szultán Zoltán Bogdándy, Balázs Fekete, Dr. Máriás).

### **Social Context**

The other possible meeting place is generated by forms of social communication. Their medium and driving force is the social consciousness and personal responsibility that opens up the context of art in the strict sense of the term. Art reacting to everyday “political kitsch”, social and environmental problems, the manipulative nature of the public sphere and, more specifically, to the tensions and contradictions in the art scene occasionally uses the most up-to-date media and effective techniques (computer, Internet publication, giant poster, electronic ad board), at other times it resorts to earlier “subcultural” modes of making itself heard and finding contact (brochures published and distributed by the artist, leaflets, posters; occasionally issue-based exhibitions: Balázs Beöthy, Tamás Komoróczy, Zsolt Koroknai, Csaba Nemes, Ágnes Szépfalvi, István Szil, Zsolt Veress).

The genre of the performance which was such a characteristic trait of the turn of the decade and which offered such a lively and lasting experience for both the artists and the audience has by now lost most of its earlier attraction. Such activities are now primarily the stuff of international performance gatherings<sup>11</sup>; even the happenings and performances that used to be a staple feature of openings have now become sporadic.

Social communication and social gatherings have received a new dimension in the Hungarian art of the nineties. The new generation automatically identifies its own activity with the larger context of international art, in which the freely interpenetrable parts of overlapping regions are integrated in a European and intercontinental context. Besides the representative international exhibitions, “daily” workshops are being developed along with the growing, intricate and inseparable network of personal and institutional relations. Furthermore, there are more and more exchange programs created by alternative, non-profit organizations (fellowships, artists’ colonies, symposiums, exhibitions), all of which, with their flexibility, variability and unexpected possibilities, go against the seclusion of the self and the non-acknowledgment and isolation of the other.

11 Expanzió (Vác), Csalánleves – Oriens (Póstelek – Békéscsaba), Stúdió erté (Nové Zámky, Slovakia), AnnART (Lake Saint Anna, Romania).

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# FOCAL POINTS OF REVIVAL: CZECH ART 1956–1963<sup>1</sup>

(SHORTENED)

The fate of Czech modern art is a history of isolation and misunderstanding. It is a history of incessant interruptions and difficult returns to the present, it is a history of illusion and strong emotions, heavy personal investments and modest results. But it is our fate; we have to know it and come to terms with it. One of the tragic phenomena of our contemporary history is a gradual loss of continuity. With great effort, we always managed at times of greatest danger to save at least that which was most essential to survive, but more and more evidently the variety of expression of society disappeared, relations were forgotten, personalities and their works were forgotten – often with no return because only a permanent awareness of continuity can be a source of learning, measurement, inspiration and challenge. If this applies to a certain extent to the overall development of Czech society in this century, it applies especially to the development after the Second World War, which was characterized by so many destroyed lives, so many taboos, and so many intentional misinterpretations. Today we live at a time when the 1950s have not yet fully been assimilated into history. There are still people to ask in our attempt to rectify at least something, although it is hard for us to distinguish the dividing line between the truth and myth.

However, we would like to emphasise that if we try today to find out the aspects of this stage in the sphere of fine arts, historical reasons were not determining in our selection. At the beginning, there was a conviction that between 1956 and 1963 Czech fine art underwent a significant shift toward authentic creative work, which remained practically concealed from the public. Personalities, who at that time, inwardly resisted the bland official production rank today – if still living – among the most accomplished artists. In their youth they were confronted with an imperious power structure on which the small indications of relaxation, naively applied by President Zápotocký himself whose visit prevented the cancellation of the first exhibition of the “May” group at the Municipal House (1958), could change nothing. Nevertheless, the young people’s creative work of that time facilitated further steps

<sup>1</sup> The text was originally published as an introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition of the same title. See: Marie Klimešová-Judlová, ed., *Ohniska znovuzrození: české umění, 1956–1963* (Praha: Galerie hlavního města Prahy, 1994). Translated by Vladimíra Žáková.

toward contemporary thinking and expression. These first steps, however, were engulfed by the subsequent development. At the moment of new liberalization in 1963 when more possibilities to exhibit opened up, unofficial artists certainly did not feel like summarizing their efforts of previous years. They wanted to present to the public the results of their contemporary, topical creative work, which was produced in a closer contact with the world. This way they actually contributed to having no remembrance of continuity.

The end of the 1960s completed the act of forgetting. New cultural persecution of artists came at the time when mature and renowned artists would under normal circumstances organize their first retrospective shows. This, however, took place only years later. The first large monographic exhibitions came as late as the second half of the 1980s. Thus the artists' early work could only be allocated a limited space within the framework of their life work, not only because it was necessary to exhibit a large volume of works of all creative periods of the artist, but also because it existed as something in itself. There was no key to understanding it without the context of its period. Therefore, we would like to find a key for our project. It should become a projection of the possibilities opened by our time.

It was a difficult task to define the period of the “revival” of modern visual expression in our country. With some artists, it had never ceased to exist, and their works became a torch in the darkest wilderness of the first years after the February 1948 *coup d'état*. However, over the eight years covered by our study, there appeared a new movement within Czech art. In the mid-1950s, the effort of several generational strata interconnected, thanks to which the continuity with the poetics of mainly wartime groups was preserved. Art began to differentiate internally into tendencies which became more definite and better formulated, but also formalized in many respects. We start the sphere of our research and the exhibition based on it with the year 1956, considered to be a significant turning point, and we close this period with 1963 which constitutes another landmark in postwar development. At the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev publicly ended the era of the Stalinist cult. But there was no material change in foreign policy and the tension of the Cold War with the danger of a total nuclear conflict still influenced the situation in Europe. Within the Eastern Bloc itself there was an ongoing power struggle, which after the period of trials culminated in the events in Hungary; and Communists in all satellite countries with substantial support of the Soviet Union solidified their positions. Despite all this, Khrushchev's speech closed the period of the worst ideological pressure and schematism in fine arts and became a signal which intellectuals tried to take advantage of. However, the space for free expression remained rather limited for a long time afterwards, and the public was usually presented with work that was somewhat compromised. The situation, especially in the late 1950s, continued to be depressing and dangerous, particularly for those personalities with definite past and radical views whose internally free expression could not be made public without difficulties or even persecution. Therefore, many older artists accepted – initially because of certain naïveté, later because of being cautious or outright calculating – the Communist dogma and they surrendered their internal freedom too lightly.

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Czech art of 1956–1963 seems eclectic in many respects; of not bringing about distinct new paths and often approximating its models all too obviously. Nevertheless, it came into being as a great inner excess pressure and became a means of resistance,



a possibility of expressing oneself in a different way, not conforming with the untrue official dullness. Although the results remained incomplete, artists invested very much into their creative work. Their artistic production of the time is characterized by formal derivativeness from often surprisingly traditional, out-of-date models; however, we can feel a great tension in it, a desire for freedom, meaningful content, truthfulness and intellectual assessment of the world. Czech production of these years was possessed by expressiveness, a great RESTLESSNESS which we can recognize in many different artists' creations and whose radiation is often irritating. Such RESTLESSNESS is found in the 1950s also in Western European art. However, as shown by the (recent) exhibition *Entre la sérénité et l'inquiétude*, organized by the Museum of Modern Arts in St. Étienne in France, for Central European many expressions remain RESTLESS even in the harmonious part of the spectrum. This is the case of Giacometti, as well as Tobey, Bissier, Balthus, Soulage, Baumeister, Morandi, Fernandez, Vieira da Silva, de Staël and others. Maybe it is caused by the fact that today we perceive these artists from the position of their being classic, which deprives our assessment of its spontaneity. It is obvious that they, too, were heavily beset by the split of the world of their time, the of nuclear conflict, life in the atmosphere of postwar Europe, in ruins of cities destroyed by bombing, at a time which pretended to be happy but at whose foundation there was a deep scepticism evidenced by a wide acceptance of existentialism and poetics of the absurd. At the same time, conservatism alien to contemporary art of the period appeared in the West as well.

Czech artists found themselves on the other side of a divided world. Here optimism prevailed as well; this time, however, it was not a natural human desire to drown postwar anxiety, but a forced stance masking the increasing errors of the regime. In this part of the continent, the perspective of hope was being lost, the difference in the standard of living deepened. With that being said, the West and the East still constituted ONE world influenced by the same events. Its difference in the 1950s was still not immense. The Communist policy of international isolation suppressed the possibility of comparison, and the life followed by culture got into vacuum. Society lacked inner dynamics; the present seemingly did not exist. Under those circumstances it was undoubtedly difficult to seek artistic expression that would stay in contact with the present, which would be original and vivid and avoid the schematism and naïveté of the time. Hybrid art, which was brought into the Czech environment by this time, has no purity of style and sometimes is even clumsy. However, it also contains RAWNESS, an important value of the inner earnestness of the lone artist who looks for a shape for his idea. Czech artists did not have courage to fully be themselves, but their creative work reflects the contradiction of the time, its Central European dimension. In the tradition of classical modern art, they tried to find current points from which they could continue. Their effort was supported also by others outside of visual media.

# IN ART INFORMEL'S FIELD OF VISION<sup>1</sup>

(SHORTENED)

The Bochum Art Museum is in possession of an exceptionally large collection of abstract art. The collection's scope is quite considerable as well, highlighting abstraction's differentiated and diverse nature worldwide. Visitors to the museum will find works by artists from a wide range of countries, generations, and ideological convictions. Besides works by famous artists, there are also those whose names have faded into the mists of time and about whom it is today difficult to find even fragmentary information. Czech artists, too, have a place in the Bochum collection: Mikuláš Medek, Josef Istler, and Vladimír Boudník. Poland is represented by Tadeusz Kantor, Jan Lebenstein, and Aleksander Kobzdej; the largest sets of works are by German and French abstractionists; and Spain's Antonio Tàpies is represented by several pieces, as are Italy's Emilio Vedova, China's Zao Wou-Ki, the American artist Sam Francis, the Russo-French painter Philippe Hosiasson, Japan's Kumi Sugai, and numerous others.

Despite their breadth of viewpoints and diverse stylistic approaches, one thing shared by most abstractionists is a familiarity with the Parisian art scene – some as early as the 1920s and 1930s, others not until the postwar era when abstraction became a dominant artistic trend. But even in Paris, the situation was hardly straightforward when it came to the establishment of new and informal approaches to art – as evidenced by the rapid succession of individual and thematic exhibitions, and by the extensive surveys of diverse abstract art held after the start of 1945. And even more events were held in 1948, the most important of which were two exhibitions: *HWPSMTB* at Galerie Colette Allendy (the initials stood for Hartung, Wols, Picabia, Stahly, Mathieu, Tàpies, and Bryen) and *White and Black* at Galerie des Deux Iles. Both events involved the critic Michel Tapié, who sought to bring together the innovations of the protagonists of new art and thus to identify their common denominator. In contrast to the word “abstract,” he introduced the term “Informalist,” a concept he more clearly defined in a catalogue text for the exhibition *Véhérences Confrontées*

1 The text was originally published in Petr Spielmann, Ludvík Kundera, and Mahulena Nešlehová, *Informel a skupina COBRA ze sbírek bochumského muzea / Informel und Gruppe COBRA aus der Sammlung des Museum Bochum* (Brno: Dům umění města Brna, 1997). Translated by Stephan von Pohl.

(Galerie Nina Dausset, 1951), by which time he was using the term “Informel.” This exhibition was also the first to compare and juxtapose the radical conceptions of American, Italian, and Parisian painting. That same year, Tapié further promoted his theories with the exhibition *Signifiants de l'Informel*, in which he highlighted “iconic-material” art as represented by Fautrier and Dubuffet alongside the contrasting pole of “lyrical abstraction” (Michaux, Serpan, Mathieu) and the extreme symbolic Informel of Riopelle. But it was not until his 1952 essay *Un Art Autre* that he defined the new search within non-objective art as a unique stance towards reality that could be more fittingly expressed as *art autre* – a “different art.”

More than twenty years later, the Italian critic and historian of modern art Enrico Crispolti offered a summary overview of this phenomenon and its various aspects in *L'informale. Storia e poetica*.<sup>2</sup> His book presented this art as a broad yet internally differentiated “movement” that brought together a number of different trends: lyrical abstraction, Art Autre, and Art Brut in France, Abstract Expressionism and action painting in the United States, and nuclearism, spatialism, and gesture painting in Italy. In his words, it was a “movement” that was not defined by any particular group of artists or a shared program, but by a “concordance of profound intentions” that had been brought together by the activities of various critics such as Tapié. One such shared intention was the attempt at a “different” interpretation of the world, which the war had imprinted with the stigmas of uncertainty, anxiety, and noetic skepticism. For these reasons alone, the roots of “Informel” – especially in Europe – grew out of a profound existential experience. Conceptually speaking, the painting ceased to be an iconic representation and became a sign, a gesture, deconstructed substance, a configuration that testified to a particular moment in the artist’s existence. Visual representation was turned into gesture, into the touch of the hand, into the body’s primary contact with substance. This, in and of itself, made it an expression that brought man back to his primal beginnings, to a world unformed and undefined by concepts, a place in which things were only beginning to take shape out of primal matter; it was art that focused attention on what is primary, on what is a sign of immanence.

With Art Informel, we are witness to the formation of a new understanding of visual language. Its establishment was not just related to the emergence of a new generation and opposition to abstraction and its protection of the painting’s traditional morphology. It was a far more fundamental question than that. This turning point demanded a different view of the world devoid of pretense, false prejudices, and idealization. At the same time, it involved a new relationship to and interpretation of this world. Of fundamental importance was the need to reevaluate the uniqueness of the individual within society. Artists found their own identity by getting to know themselves and by returning to the sources of civilisation, to a world in the state of being born.

But this newly forming relationship to the world could only come about if artists managed to break free from ingrained habits and agreed-upon schemas, if they untethered themselves from a world organized into shapes and presented experienced existence in all its unboundedness and constant openness. This approach, however, required a new visual concept associated with the use of new and unusual methods, materials, and techniques, and also a redefinition of the creative process. The basic elements on the surface of the canvas now were gesture, sign, and the material of Informel structures. Emphasis was placed on freedom and immediacy of expression, on contemplative concentration and the transformation of substance, for the aim was

2 Enrico Crispolti, *L'informale. Storia e poetica*, vol. 1-4 (Assisi-Rome: Beniamino Carucci Editore, 1971).

to transcend the individual dimension in order to enter universal, previously unexplored spaces.

As in other European countries with a rich tradition of expressive styles and Surrealist and imaginative art, the prewar creative climate in the Czech lands offered favourable conditions for abstract experimentation. Of particular importance in this regard were the activities of the younger Surrealists of the Ra art group, which had formed during the war. One of the group's members who produced remarkable works of art during this time was Josef Istler, who in 1945 had begun to establish himself as a creator of monotypes, prints, and paintings made using a richly differentiated Informalist structure of linear signs created by a spontaneous hand. Istler's works were even appreciated by Crispolti, who included him among the protagonists of European "Informel."<sup>3</sup>

At the time, the conditions for the development of new artistic visions in the Czech lands were highly promising. Whereas in the West the postwar years were characterized by the consolidation and development of abstract art, in Bohemia and Moravia as in the rest of the "Eastern Bloc," it was a time of darkness and repression for nonconformist art. Avant-garde artists withdrew into the exile of their private worlds, where they produced works without any prospects of showing them in public. In this climate, where one source of support came from earlier avant-garde artists who had not submitted to political pressures but continued to produce their work, the rebirth of Modernist endeavours was accompanied by a slowly forming local version of Informalist art. It had its peculiarities, its "differences", and the courage to face the social reality of false optimism.

An illuminating description of the situation in the countries under Soviet influence was given at the *Informel* symposium (Saarbrücken, 1982) by the painter Gerhard Hoehme, who had managed to flee the GDR in the early 1950s and settled in Düsseldorf. Hoehme made sure to point out the different situation that he had experienced there: the permanent fear and anxiety, the desperate lack of information, and the courage to express oneself differently than was demanded by the norms of the socialist regime. It certainly is interesting to hear that the "dense," self-enclosed Informel structures that he was creating at the time related to this experience.<sup>4</sup> But Hoehme also pointed to another strong impulse behind art created under totalitarianism: an awareness of opposition. Existence in opposition produced a closed elite society and deepened the inner world of the artist and his spiritual expression.

But let us return to expressions of Czech Informel, which were not very expansive. Besides spontaneous subjective expressions and calligraphic gestures (Vladimír Boudník, Istler, Jan Kotík, Jiří Balcar, Jan Koblasa), it produced symbolically and expressively rich textural works (Mikuláš Medek, Robert Piesen, Boudník, Istler, Balcar, Koblasa, Jiří Valenta, Čestmír Janošek) whose more radical examples were represented by the expressively tense material anti-painting of the youngest generation of artists (Valenta, Aleš Veselý, Zdeněk Beran, Zbyšek Sion, Antonín Málek, Antonín Tomalík).

Besides Medek, the driving force behind the local version of Informel was Boudník, who had contributed to the emergence of the New Sensibility and other ways of artistic thinking since the late 1940s, when he produced (and by his manifestos, defined) a style that he called "Explosionalism." Its aim was the renewal of the world through the "explosive" creative force inherent to life and the universe. In fact,

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 564–72.

<sup>4</sup> Georg-Wilhelm Koltzsch, ed., *Symposium Informel. Deutsches Informel* (Berlin: Edition Galerie Georg Nothelfer, 1986).

Boudník concluded his first manifesto of Explosionalism (24 March 1949) by saying that “the painting must be a film strip of innumerable tensions and psychic explosions condensed into an unmoving surface and presented within an infinitely short time, with the involvement of the viewer’s movement imagination.” It is in this spirit that he produced the *décalques*, monotypes, and soot drawings on glass that he began making in the early 1950s, using creative association to stimulate the imagination and encourage spontaneous records of mental states. He subsequently expanded his innovation through the discovery of “active printmaking” (1954), which was founded on the use of “active” traces of various tools and real materials (factory waste) that he hammered or pressed into sheet metal, thus producing an experience of the depth of space, the transience of time, and the presence of the miraculous in concrete things. Within the context of European art, these works are unique in that they evoked an acoustic sensation and communicated an experience of the “resonant” cosmos.

If we consider the similarities and differences between European and Czech Informel art, we must focus on gestural, expressive approaches. Although these were not numerous, they have their specifics. We encounter the dramatic structuration of emptiness only rarely. Weighed down by the *horror vacui*, the surface was always treated in its entirety and understood as a source of support. It was articulated through and covered in dramatic strokes and spontaneous cryptograms and structured using an emotionally urgent colourfulness. One artist for whom such an expressive style was inherent was the painter Jan Kotík. His paintings were defined by the search for a shared “nerve” of the organic and inorganic world, which for him were positive creative forces. Starting in the mid-1950s, these forces determined the drama of his spontaneously elaborated lines, the expressive shorthand of his signs, and his structuration of colour surfaces. Kotík understood painting as an operation in which intuition is continually balanced out by a reasoned constructive equivalent. By comparison, the works of other painters, especially the younger ones, lived by their symbolic and existential content. One example was Jiří Balcar, who in the late 1950s was drawn to free gestural abstraction by the energetic stylization of the rhythms of urban life, transformed into the language of simple marks, codes, ciphers, and random lines, which in 1960 he combined with the expressive capacity of the darkened structures of the paint substance. By comparison, Istler, who had begun working with psychograms of painted gestures since the mid-1940s, managed in the following decade to produce a stimulating combination of psychic automatism with chance and the unexpected nature of dripping to produce eerie symbolic configurations that he brought to life through the illusive finesse of coloured light.

The inclination towards content-based approaches and introspection, which is an important characteristic of Czech art, was particularly expressed in how artists shaped the paint’s capacity to convey meaning as they spread it across the entire surface of the painting. The creative process mixed and brought together conscious and unconscious mental factors with somatic elements and archetypal feelings and ideas. It was a path followed by quite a few Czech artists, some of the most distinctive examples being Medek, whose psychic irritation of the paint substance anticipated the local form of textural painting, Piesen, and (of the younger generation) Koblasa, Valenta, and Balcar.

While Medek’s rendering of the paint substance possessed a distinctly existential and psychic dimension and his works were transformed into an exposed membrane of consciousness, Piesen’s darkened structures tended to explore the archetypal depths of the collective unconscious. In his hands, the amorphous mass of wrinkled paint was neither a matrix of the injured psyche nor a defense against the nothingness and



uprootedness described and destroyed by the traces of existence. With Piesen's art, we are witness to something else: The spiritualization and transformation of substance was his starting point towards transcendence, a path towards possibly achieving the mythical unity of primal beings. In so doing, he introduced into Czech non-objective art an evocative dimension of archetypal depths and atavisms, to which younger artists in particular responded: Koblasa, Veselý, Janošek, and so on. But despite the diversity of domestic textural painting, they share a common bond – the effort to create a definitive, complete, and finalized form of the work of art. In view of the unmediated and open nature of the process by which Art Informel was made, this was a contradictory requirement, but one rooted in cultural tradition that significantly contributed to the specific nature of Czech art.

A stimulating change occurred in the late 1950s, influenced by Boudník's discovery of "structural printmaking", with which he introduced into Czech art the expressive dimension of a wide variety of materials that he loosely assembled on the matrix and changed over the course of the printmaking process. In so doing, he unexpectedly presaged the concept of the painting as an object that emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s among a small group of the youngest radicals who understood (and in their works managed to develop) the semantic potential of non-traditional materials. Their group was not too large and consisted mostly of fellow students from Prague's Academy of Fine Arts. In early 1960, it included Koblasa, Valenta, Veselý, Janošek, Beran, Tomalík, Málek, and Sion. Boudník's original art had become a spiritual and moral source of strength for them, and so they invited him into their midst. That year, they made a striking appearance on the scene with two private studio exhibitions known as the *Confrontations*.<sup>5</sup> Besides the works of radical international abstraction (Dubuffet, Tàpies, Burri, Fautrier), the dramas of Samuel Beckett, Kafka, and Klíma, new music, and other forms of expression, they were inspired and stimulated by the urban environment of Prague itself. "It was primarily a fascination with certain late Baroque works," recalls Beran, "in which the movement of the material, the disintegration of form, and the agency of time itself evoked an anxious atmosphere that was especially in tune with the reality of contemporary life."<sup>6</sup>

The *Confrontations* reflected a similarity of orientation that was best reflected by the raw vocabulary of material anti-painting. The unusual nature of these artistic expressions rested in the fact that the works were not merely an original personal self-realization, but that they were the result of a long process of creation involving all parts of the psyche. Even the somatic act was involved. The focus was on material, which was touched, kneaded, and destroyed with the aim of capturing the broadest possible scope of human existence, of reaching deeper towards its very essence. At the same time, artists worked the surfaces of structures created by assembling real materials, which they hammered, layered, scorched, destroyed, and reassembled in such a manner that they suddenly took on the form of almost magical artefacts. Among the *Confrontation* artists, the similarity of artistic approaches produced a vision of the painting as a material object whose inherent mysteriousness created a distinctive version of European "Informel."

Rather than gestural forms of expression, Czech artists tended towards a spiritual and symbolic understanding of their works. This interest permeated both

5 *Confrontation I* was held on 16 March 1960 at Jiří Valenta's studio in Prague-Libeň; *Confrontation II* was held on 30 October 1960 at Aleš Veselý's studio in Prague-Žižkov.

6 Zdeněk Beran, "Soukromý dotazník," in *Český informel. Průkopníci abstrakce z let 1957–1964*, ed. Mahulena Nešlehová (Praha: Galerie hlavního města Prahy, 1991), 255.



the substance of textural painting and the rendering of material structures. It is also the reason for the domestic emphasis on the processing of these structures, the cultivation of artistic means, and the drive to unify diversity into one single whole that has organically grown from the traces of direct interventions, signs, and the configurations of shapes. Hence, also the “Baroqueness” and mysteriousness that more than a few have ascribed to Czech Informel. Artists evoked the Baroque principle of painting rooted in the local spiritual consciousness. This inner “attunement” also motivated the domestic interest in the art of Tàpies, Cuixart, Feito, and Millares, a fascination that was inspired by the universal pathos characteristic of Czech art. In fact, when it comes to the relationship to Spanish “Informel,” we can even speak of an inner harmony. This affinity rests not only in the choice of restrained colours, a captivation with black, and a meditative bent, but also in the attempt at activating spiritual memory. On the Czech art scene, the spirituality of the Gothic, the imagination of Mannerism, and the expressiveness of the Baroque were joined by Judaism and Byzantinism; artists created their works with an awareness of spiritual belonging and not with the goal of its destruction.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can now emphasise the vibrancy of this phenomenon. “Informel” even presents itself as a fundamental solution to the visual expression of states of mind and the consciousness of man in the postwar era and during the Cold War. It was a solution that many have rebuked – and that is still criticized today – for being excessively burdened by existential and subjective issues. Today, however, we know that its path led to the transcendence of personal emotional structures and the incorporation of all aspects of the artist’s psycho-physical constitution. It was a difficult path towards primordial existence, towards uncovering and regenerating the atavisms hidden within us, a path of becoming self-aware and finding one’s own identity. But it was not an “epilogue” to European spiritual development; rather, it was a “prologue” to its subsequent stages of development.

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BRIDGING THE GAPS.  
AN ANTHOLOGY  
OF ART CRITICISM  
IN CENTRAL  
AND EASTERN  
EUROPE AFTER 1989

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