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MODERNISM WITH A HUMAN FACE:
SYNTHESIS OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN EASTERN EUROPE, 1954-1958

by

Nikolaos Drosos

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

MODERNISM WITH A HUMAN FACE: SYNTHESIS OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN
EASTERN EUROPE, 1958-1958

by

Nikolaos Drosos

Advisor: Prof. Romy Golan

The “synthesis of the arts,” which usually referred to the integration of murals, sculptures and reliefs into architecture, was a key aspect of art and architecture in many parts of the world during the 1950s, from Western Europe to Latin America. It was intended to “humanize” the increasingly industrialized modern architecture, while providing art with a platform from which to act outside of the confines of museums and galleries, in the “real” space of society. More importantly, the concept centered on the collaboration between people of different skills and backgrounds, such as artists, architects and craftspeople, who ought to form a cohesive creative community in order for synthesis to emerge. For this reason, the synthesis of the arts was often envisioned as a metaphor for the greater social order of the postwar period and thus, as will be argued here, became particularly prominent in periods of political transition. This dissertation focuses on such a time and place when the concept resurged: Post-Stalinist Eastern Europe, a time when both the aesthetics and politics of Stalinism had to be reformed in the hopes of attaining a “Communism with a Human Face.” The synthesis of the arts was key to this process, as it allowed for different social visions to be tested in the delimited space of art and architecture before being applied to society as a whole. At the same time, the term’s instability and inherent vagueness allowed its continued usage throughout this transition, and within distinct contexts. It

could refer to a wide range of things, from interior design to murals and sculptures integrated into modernist architecture, and from immersive, multi-media environments to historicist architecture featuring ornaments in ceramic and stone. Each model represented a different mode of artistic production, as well as a different vision for art's role under socialism. The dissertation thus compares such visions of synthesis, as both a theoretical construct and a practical application, in three Eastern European countries: the Soviet Union, the undisputed political center of the bloc; its largest satellite, the People's Republic of Poland, which experienced a swift and dramatic de-Stalinization and subsequently became a center for reformist thought; and finally, Yugoslavia, whose efforts at developing its own brand of socialism began to bear fruit at the time, when the country emerged as a non-aligned, third pole within the Cold War. This geographical span is counterbalanced by a sharply focused chronology that allows for a close examination of this paradigm shift. Beginning in 1954, when the first signs of aesthetic change can be discerned, it concludes in 1958, when the new, "socialist-modern" mode of synthesis reached its apogee with the Eastern bloc pavilions at the Brussels World Fair. I argue that the synthesis of the arts constitutes a key element of reformist communist culture, a short-lived phase when a renewed faith in mass utopia was still possible, before the dissident culture of 1960s and 1970s Eastern Europe took hold. Still firmly inscribed within the official culture, the late-1950s practices examined here sought a difficult compromise between increasing art's autonomy while preserving the social purpose assigned to it under communism.

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INTRODUCTION

Synthesis of the arts (*sintez iskusstv*): The organic combination into a single work of various types of fine and decorative art with architecture, aiming at creating an integrated artistic-architectural form (buildings, ensembles of buildings, interiors). The concept of the “synthesis of the arts” implies the unity of composite built work and the consistency of style, scale, proportion and rhythm of all its elements. This unity, as well as all the artistic methods for the attainment of the synthesis of the arts, depend on the most vivid and solid realization of one or another ideological and artistic concept.¹

This is how the synthesis of the arts, a key trope in the discourse on art and architecture under state socialism, was defined in the second edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, the universal reference work in the Soviet Union.² A few points are important here. First, the synthesis of the arts is a trans-historical category: it is not specific to any particular period or style, as also attested by the examples listed after this initial definition: Ancient Egyptian and Greek temples, Gothic cathedrals, monuments of China, India, Korea and Japan, Renaissance and Baroque interiors, as well as examples of Russian architecture from the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries.³ Second, its existence depends on a dominant ideology, specific to each historical period, around which all the disparate arts can be unified into a cohesive whole. The Soviet synthesis of the arts, presented as a culmination of this long historical trajectory, is thus an expression of state socialism:

In the Soviet Union the construction of public buildings and facilities, as well as of entire architectural complexes, has provided great opportunities for the realization of the synthesis of the arts. The means of artistic expression inherent in each field of the visual arts are used for the creation of realistic monumental works that reflect the heroism of the people, humanist ideas and the life-affirming power of the socialist system.⁴

¹ *Bol'shaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya*, 2nd ed., vol. 39 (1 March 1956), s.v. “sintez iskusstv.”

² The entry was absent from the first edition (1926-47), which was significantly smaller than the second one. It was expanded for the third edition (1969-78).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

This text appeared in print on March 1st 1956, at a time when the “socialist system” of the Soviet Union was undergoing fundamental changes.⁵ Only five days prior, Nikita Khrushchev delivered his famous “Secret Speech,” in which he acknowledged Stalin’s crimes and thus initiated the process of de-Stalinization that would transform the Soviet Union and its satellite states.⁶ As will be discussed below, this also entailed the rejection of Stalinist architecture, in favor of new, modernist forms. Yet against such political and artistic shifts, the synthesis of the arts remained a constant trope in art and architecture for decades to come, not only in the Soviet Union, but in most other socialist countries of Eastern Europe as well. It was of way of articulating the place assigned to art: in the absence of a developed art market, art ought to exist in the “real space” of society and assume an active role in the construction of socialism. By abandoning “bourgeois” galleries and joining permanent, public architectural contexts, art would be able to exercise a social function that mobile works of art in exhibitions were deemed incapable of fulfilling. Furthermore, art could help mitigate anxieties surrounding the mechanization of construction and preserve the ideological content of architecture when modernism was established in the socialist world during the second half of the 1950s.

The synthesis of the arts was both a theoretical concept that was elaborated in publications, lectures and conferences, and a concrete practice that developed through realized projects, such as public buildings and exhibition pavilions. The analysis that follows seeks to

⁵ Throughout this text, I use the terms socialism and communism as they had been employed in the countries that form the subject of this study. Communism was the aspired goal of a future classless society, and the ruling parties were named communist due to their commitment to this goal. Socialism, on the other hand referred to the extant, transitional system that would eventually lead to communism. “State socialism” is often used to distinguish this form of socialism from that of Western Europe, such as the social democracy in Austria or the Scandinavian countries.

⁶ The volumes of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia were printed and circulated in sequence, with a new volume appearing every few months. Thus, there is a significant lag between the first and final (fiftieth) volume of the second edition, published in 1950 and 1958 respectively. The entry for the synthesis of the arts appears in volume thirty-nine.

preserve this dialectic between theory and practice as one of the defining aspects of the phenomenon. It will thus focus on both realized and unrealized projects, as well as the critical discourse that surrounded them, and will emphasize the often unstable relationship between those three fields of activity. In the primary sources examined here, the term “synthesis of the arts” and other related concepts such as “plastic integration” were often imprecise, and their definition malleable. They could refer to a variety of things ranging from interior design to murals and sculptures integrated into modernist architecture, and from immersive, multi-media environments to historicist architecture featuring ornaments in ceramic and stone. This imprecision might appear as a limitation, yet it can also serve as an important heuristic tool: it is these shifts in meaning, as well as the constant adaptations of the term to reflect changing conceptions of art under distinct sociopolitical conditions, that can offer new historical insights.

This semantic instability is perhaps what most differentiates the Eastern European synthesis from its better-known manifestations in Western Europe and Latin America during the 1950s, where it was more strictly defined as the integration of distinct murals, free-standing sculptures and reliefs into modernist architecture. Popular during the late 1940s and early 1950s, the topic was discussed in the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM) in Bridgewater (1947) Bergamo (1949) and Huddleston (1951) and was heavily promoted in widely circulating journals such as the French *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui*. Le Corbusier was one of its leading proponents: he had published two articles on the matter at the end of the Second World War in the journal *Volontés*, which was associated with the French resistance.⁷ His engagement with the concept culminated in his unrealized Porte Maillot project (1949-50), a permanent pavilion in Paris that would be dedicated to the synthesis of the arts, which he hoped would

⁷ Le Corbusier, “Vers l'unité,” *Volontés* (December 13, 1944) and “Aux approches d'une synthèse,” *Volontés* (August 8, 1945).

garner the support of UNESCO.⁸ In 1952, he reiterated some of the project's basic premises in a short lecture at the closing session of the UNESCO-sponsored International Conference of Artists in Venice, entitled "The Relations Between Artists: Synthesis of the Plastic Arts."⁹ The lecture focused on what Le Corbusier termed "*chantiers de synthèse*:" construction sites where creative collaborations between artists and architects would take place. These would allow art to imbue the built environment with poetic qualities (what he called *présences*), which would incite emotional responses from the inhabitants. Conversely, architecture was to provide art with a context from which it could operate in the social realm (the "*terrain de la réalité*") and thus regain an active role in society that mobile, gallery-bound artworks seemed to have forgone.

What makes the speech particularly poignant is its emphasis on the relationships between the artists and architects that would come together to form a synthesis of the arts. Le Corbusier rejected interventions by the state or any other external factor in the formation of such communities. Instead, these should be "spontaneous, self-organized and self-managed groupings."¹⁰ Yet a paradox is latent in the lecture. Despite all his talk of spontaneity, Le Corbusier sought to defend the primacy of architecture, emphasizing the "architectural conditions" that should first be established before any synthesis of the arts could take place. In addition, he took it upon himself to instigate such a creative community, by assuming the leading

⁸ See Ann Koll, "The Synthesis of the Arts in the Context of Post-World War II: A Study of Le Corbusier's Ideas and His Porte Maillot Pavilion," PhD Dissertation, City University of New York, 1999.

⁹ The lecture survives in two slightly different typewritten versions at the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris, U3-7-317 and U3-10-318. See the discussion of Le Corbusier's 1952 speech and its relation his earlier one in Rome in 1936 in Romy Golan, "Italy and the Concept of the Synthesis of the Arts," in *Architecture and Art: New Visions, New Strategies*, ed. Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen and Esa Laaksonen (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Academy, 2007): 60-66. See also Christopher E. M. Pearson, "Le Corbusier's 'Synthesis of the Major Arts' in the Context of the French Reconstruction," in *The Built Surface: Architecture and the Pictorial Arts from Romanticism to the Twenty-First Century*, ed. C. Anderson and K. Koehler (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002): 222-23. The attendees, listed in the copy of the lecture at the Fondation Le Corbusier, included architects (Lucio Costa, Erensto Nathan Rogers), artists (Hans Hartung, Marino Marini, Fritz Wotruba and many others), as well the British art critic Herbert Read. Despite the wide range of nationalities, none of the attendees came from Eastern Europe.

¹⁰ Fondation Le Corbusier, U3-7-317, p. 3.

role and even having a number of artists and critics sign his lecture, which thus became a sort of declaration of synthesis. Finally, recognizing that such collaborations should be premised on a shared set of principles, he recommended his own *Modulor*: a system of proportions that he had devised in the preceding years and was based on those of his own, significantly above average, body. The universal adoption of the *Modulor* would allow for a global network of “chantiers de synthèse” (construction sites of synthesis) with mobile works and itinerant artists, which would thus ensure the ongoing expansion of synthesis. In this model, Le Corbusier reserved for himself the position of the architect as *archi-tekton*: the master builder of this new, global construction site.

If in the aforementioned Soviet version the synthesis of the arts emerges from a shared commitment to an ideology (and it remained unspecified whether this was coerced or not), in Le Corbusier’s account it results from the artists’ voluntary adoption of the architect’s personal vision and the acceptance of his leadership. In both cases, the problem of the synthesis of the arts is political at its core. Le Corbusier’s hierarchical approach to synthesis should be viewed in conjunction with the Western European liberal democracies from which it emerged: while it emphasized freedom and participation and rejected any external coercion in the formation of the group, it also relied on the paternalistic guidance of a single (implicitly male) architect, not unlike the Christian-Democrat leaders of postwar Western Europe, such as Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer. In contrast, the synthesis of the arts in the countries of the Eastern bloc became the aesthetic corollary of state socialism: it emphasized collectivity and a purportedly non-hierarchical mode of collaboration between artists, architects and builders. If the synthesis of the arts served as a metaphor for social relations, then the versions of synthesis developed east of the Iron Curtain pointed to the abolition of classes: the architects should abandon their white-

collar positions and “take to the scaffolding,” as a common Soviet slogan suggested.¹¹ The construction site, a ubiquitous situation in both halves of war-torn postwar Europe, thus metonymically stood for society at large: it was not only the *locus* of reconstruction, but it was also where new relationships between different groups were forged. In both the Soviet and the Corbusian model, the aspired goal was a unity (often described as harmonious, organic etc.), not only between art and architecture, but also between the creative forces of the construction site. The two were interdependent.

In many Western countries, the lofty, paternalistic discourse on synthesis represented by Le Corbusier eventually lost its appeal towards the end of the 1950s. The most prominent monograph on the issue, Paul Damaz’s celebratory survey *Art in European Architecture / Synthèse des arts* of 1956, prefaced by Le Corbusier, can be seen in retrospect as the swan song of synthesis in Western Europe.¹² Soon thereafter, the enthusiasm for the matter quickly waned, and the topic practically disappeared towards the end of the decade, when the high modernist discourse that had sustained it gradually began to feel outmoded, as did humanist ideas about the redemptive, “humanizing” power of art.¹³ In the 1960s, it had already become part of art history – and a marginal one at that. A popular French survey of contemporary art, Michel Ragon’s *Vingt-cinq ans d’art vivant*, contained a section on the synthesis of the arts in the first edition of 1969, which was then eliminated from all subsequent editions.¹⁴ In Italy where, as Romy Golan

¹¹ Vladimir Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two*, trans. John Hill and Roann Barris (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 203.

¹² Paul F. Damaz, *Art in European Architecture / Synthèse des arts* (New York: Reinhold Publishing, 1956). Paul Damaz was a Portuguese architect who moved to the US due to his involvement in the international project for the United Nations headquarters in New York.

¹³ On the rise and fall of synthesis in Italy and France during the 1950s, see the final chapter of Romy Golan, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927-1957* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 181-247.

¹⁴ Michel Ragon, *Vingt-cinq ans d’art vivant, chronique vécue de l’art contemporain, de l’abstraction au Pop Art, 1944-1969* (Paris: Casterman, 1969), 367-73. The same happened with a section on the synthesis

has pointed out, the conditions were ripe for a more direct critique and dismantling of the synthesis of the arts due to the legacy of fascism, this occurred even earlier.¹⁵ In his survey of contemporary art published in 1961, the Italian critic Gillo Dorfles included a section entitled “Attempts and Failure for a ‘Synthesis of the Arts,’” in which he described the Corbusian synthesis in negative terms.¹⁶ Like the other cases mentioned above, this section was completely removed in subsequent editions. By the mid-1970s the issue was largely forgotten, only to return in recent studies: these include Ann Koll’s dissertation on Le Corbusier’s Porte Maillot project (1999); Christopher Pearson’s monograph on the UNESCO headquarters in Paris (2010), as well as his earlier studies on Le Corbusier’s ideas of synthesis; the essays presented at the 2007 conference; Romy Golan’s *Muralnomad: the Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927-1957* (2009); and, more recently, Nicola Pezolet’s dissertation on the synthesis of the arts in France (2013).¹⁷

Like Damaz’s book in 1956, this growing body of literature has thus far solely focused on the West of the Iron Curtain. This dissertation seeks to shift the focus of this discussion to Europe’s often ignored Eastern half. The aim is not simply to expand the geographical scope of such studies of mid-century art and architecture, or to rescue significant figures from oblivion, although this is definitely worthwhile. Most importantly, it is to further stress the overt political

of the arts in the German survey Jürgen Claus, *Kunst heute: Personen, Analysen, Dokumente* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1969), 148-150, also eliminated from subsequent editions.

¹⁵ Romy Golan, “Italy and the Concept of the Synthesis of the Arts,” in *Architecture and Art*, as well as *Muralnomad*, 181-247.

¹⁶ Gillo Dorfles, “Tentativi e fallimento d’una ‘sintesi delle arti,’” in *Ultime tendenze nell’arte d’oggi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1961): 170-77.

¹⁷ Ann Koll, “The Synthesis of the Arts in the Context of Post-World War II”; Christopher E. M. Pearson, *Designing UNESCO: Art, Architecture and International Politics at Mid-Century* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010); Pearson, “Le Corbusier’s ‘Synthesis of the Major Arts’ in the Context of the French Reconstruction;” Golan, *Muralnomad*; Nicola Pezolet, “Spectacles Plastiques: Reconstruction and the Debates on the ‘Synthesis of the Arts’ in France, 1944-1962,” PhD Dissertation, MIT, 2013. For an overview, see Joan Ockman, “Plastic Epic: The Synthesis of the Arts Discourse in France in the Mid-Twentieth Century,” in *Architecture and Art: New Visions, New Strategies*, ed. Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen and Esa Laaksonen (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Academy, 2007): 30-61.

dimensions of the concept: while only latent in the West, they were central to the phenomenon as it developed in the East. As many of the aforementioned studies have suggested, the synthesis of the arts was a passing episode in the history of Western art. Its association with the conciliatory, moderate politics of the early 1950s made it highly appropriate for the immediate postwar moment, yet also irrelevant as the decade progressed. In postwar Eastern Europe, on the other hand, the synthesis of the arts was associated with a much larger political project, that of communist utopia. Despite the constant political changes from 1917 onwards, the synthesis of the arts, due to its malleability, persisted as a way to articulate art's position in a socialist society, from the 1920s all the way to the 1980s.¹⁸

Unlike the the emergence of voices critical of synthesis in many Western countries (such as that of Dorfles in Italy), the concept carried universally positive connotations in Eastern Europe. Indeed, a common thread in all the discussions that will be analyzed here was the notion that a synthesis of the arts was highly desirable. At a time of rapid changes in the art and architecture of Eastern Europe, the commitment to the concept thus provided a constant point of consensus that straddled seemingly irreconcilable periods and artistic practices. This was particularly evident in Poland, where artists and critics continued their support of synthesis throughout the political and artistic transitions of 1956: the same critics that advocated for Socialist Realist mosaics in 1953, promoted industrial design in 1958, and both were similarly suggested as ways for uniting the arts. The position of the synthesis of the arts in art criticism thus mirrored that of communism in the official discourse: although it remained the undisputed goal, different, often competing paths for attaining it were envisioned. If the synthesis of the arts functioned as a political metaphor, as discussed above, then the examination of the phenomenon

¹⁸ For an overview of the synthesis of the arts in Eastern Europe beyond the period examined here, see the conclusion.

in post-Stalinist Eastern Europe should be viewed against the changing political landscape during the time of De-Stalinization.

Communism with a Human Face: The Historical Framework

Following the Yalta agreement of 1945 and the division of Europe into two ideological camps, the Soviet political system was soon expanded to Eastern Europe. Yet from the onset, this process of expansion was accompanied by a gradual splintering. Already in 1948, the rift between Joseph Stalin and Yugoslavia's Josip Broz Tito set the Balkan country on a separate course, which resulted in the crystallization of a distinctly Yugoslav brand of state socialism by the mid-1950s. At the same time, other countries east of the Iron Curtain that remained within the Soviet orbit underwent a process of Stalinization that was had been completed by Stalin's death in the spring of 1953. By then, all Soviet satellite states were led by authoritarian men loyal to Moscow, had adopted constitutions modelled on the Soviet one, instituted forced collectivization and coercive state apparatuses like the secret police, and had also fully adopted the official aesthetic dogma of Socialist Realism.¹⁹

With Nikita Khrushchev's ascendancy to the leadership of the Soviet Union there was a gradual reckoning of the crimes committed under Stalin, such as the purges, labor camps and mass deportations. This culminated in Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" of 1956, which initiated the period known as the "Thaw," after Ilya Ehrenburg's emblematic novel of the same title. The last four years of the 1950s entailed a series of reforms that aimed at establishing a new version of state socialism, which would salvage the earlier utopian dreams of a classless society from the Stalinist catastrophe. It is important to note that this was a time when faith in mass utopia was

¹⁹ On the expansion of Stalinist architecture beyond the Soviet Union and into satellite states of Eastern Europe, see Anders Åman, *Architecture and Ideology in Eastern Europe During the Stalin Era: An Aspect of Cold War History* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992).

still widespread, before the emergence of a distinct, dissident culture in the 1960s that often assumed a cynical attitude towards it. “Communism with a human face,” the period’s central motto, was still seen by many as an attainable prospect.²⁰

The task at hand was to modify communism with the addition of a “human face,” which also implied an admission that the previous visions of communism had indeed been lacking one. At the same time, it was crucial not to replace communism by some other term, but instead to preserve its centrality. This was precisely the spirit of reform that defined the Thaw: the aim was to improve the system in order to save it, while staving off a revolution that would throw everything into question, like the one that unfolded in Hungary in November 1956. This reformist impetus affected many aspects of society: from day-to-day policies to the very theoretical foundations of the political system. Certain countries such as Poland also saw a flourishing of new versions of Marxism at the time, often termed “Marxist Humanism,” that sought to strike a new balance between the needs of the individual and the demands of the collective.²¹ Centered around a new interest in Marx’s earlier philosophical texts, this was an intellectual movement that mirrored the rise of the New Left in the West. Although many of its protagonists, such as Leszek Kołakowski in Poland, would go on to become vocal dissidents in the 1960s, they were still committed Marxists during the period in question, working to reclaim Marx’s theories from what they saw as their distortion under Stalinism.²²

²⁰ The slogan, phrased “Socialism with a human face,” was famously proposed by Czechoslovak leader Alexander Dubček in 1968, as the main tenet of the set of reforms known as the Prague Spring. Rather than the origin of the concept, however, 1968 represented the culmination and final stage of efforts at “humanizing” state socialism that had begun with the Hungarian Revolution and the Marxist Humanism of the late 1950s.

²¹ See the discussion of Polish Marxist Humanism in Chapter Two, as well as the later *Praxis* group in Yugoslavia, discussed in Chapter Three.

²² Although this exceeds the purview of this study, the attitudes towards Leninism were more mixed; While in the Soviet Union Leninism functioned as the origin towards one should turn in order to overcome the Stalinist heresy, certain revisionist voices in Poland and began to suggest that Lenin’s

As the etymology of the term “reform” suggests, this was also an aesthetic process, suggesting the alteration of an existing form in order to create a new, yet related one. Indeed, one of the most visible signs of change during de-Stalinization was the rejection of Socialist Realism and the re-espousal of modernist art and architecture that had been suppressed under Stalin.²³ The analysis that follows seeks to eschew a direct equivalence between political and artistic reform, or a simple causal relationship between the two. It will demonstrate how artistic change often preceded political change, as new forms of social organization were tested in the delimited space of artistic production before being applied to society at large. More importantly, the specific framework of the synthesis of the arts allows for the interpretation of cases when architectural and artistic reform did not coincide. One such example is the Soviet Union, where the turn towards modernist architecture in the late 1950s was not always accompanied by an abandonment of Socialist Realist art, thus creating stylistically disjointed combinations of art and architecture that, as will be argued, offer valuable insights into the culture of the Thaw in the USSR.

Another important aspect of the late 1950s was the increasing heterogeneity of socialist Eastern Europe, which had already begun to grow with the Soviet-Yugoslav rift of 1948. Marginalized under Stalin due to Tito’s defiance towards Moscow, Yugoslavia emerged during the Thaw as a valid model for socialism. Even before the Secret Speech of 1956, Khrushchev made a point of reconciling with Tito during an official visit to Yugoslavia in 1955. In Belgrade, the new Soviet leader admitted that “several roads to communism” existed, thus not only accepting the Yugoslav position, but perhaps also allowing for more such diverging paths to

interpretation of Marx was already to blame for the crimes of Stalinism. See discussion in Chapters One and Two.

²³ In non-aligned Yugoslavia, Socialist Realism never took firm hold, but still coexisted with modernist tendencies during the late 1940s and early 1950s. See Chapter Three.

exist in the future.²⁴ Already in the late 1950s and early 1960s, many observers noted that a new, “polycentric” model was emerging in the socialist world.²⁵ This is not to say that Soviet control over Eastern Europe dissipated. The invasions of Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968) by forces of the Warsaw Pact quelled reformist movements that threatened to take these countries out of the Soviet orbit, clearly establishing the limits of both the post-Stalinist liberalizations and the right of each country to take its “own path to communism.” Still, the Thaw did loosen the centripetal pull of Moscow, and allowed for a variety of political directions to emerge in different countries, each accompanied by distinct visions about the place of art and architecture within socialism. Divergences peaked during the first five years after Stalin’s death, which coincides with the main focus of this study. This diversity within what is often seen as a uniform bloc within the Cold War will be demonstrated here through three case studies that best exemplify it: the Soviet Union, the undisputed political center of the bloc; its largest satellite, the People’s Republic of Poland, which experienced a swift and dramatic de-Stalinization and subsequently became a center for reformist thought; and finally, nonaligned Yugoslavia, whose efforts at developing its own brand of socialism began to bear fruit at the time, when the country emerged as a non-aligned, third pole within the Cold War. As these countries embarked on their own “roads to communism,” diverse visions of synthesis took shape within distinct political contexts, ranging from the reluctant continuation of Stalinist academicist tendencies to the rekindling of avant-garde ideas about abolishing the traditional mediums altogether. Inscribed within their sociopolitical contexts and compared to each other, each vision of synthesis will be

²⁴ It would not take long until more such splits developed, such as with Albania from 1955 onward and with China in 1960.

²⁵ Walter Laqueur and Leopold Labedz, *Polycentrism, The New Factor in International Communism* (New York: Praeger, 1962); Paul E. Zinner, *National Communism and Popular Revolt in Eastern Europe: A Selection of Documents on Events in Poland and Hungary, February-November, 1956* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956); Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Soviet Bloc, Unity and Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

treated as a political proposition, as a new articulation of art's role in socialist society during a time when the very premises of the latter were being rethought.

This broad geographical scope is balanced by a sharply focused chronology that allows for a close analysis of the period.²⁶ Although they occasionally address the entire decade, the chapters of this dissertation focus on the brief period between 1954, when the first signs of political and artistic change appear, and conclude in 1958 the culmination of these processes. Each country is given its own separate chapter, beginning with the Soviet Union and proceeding to Poland and Yugoslavia, comparatively examining the development of the synthesis of the arts during this period. The fourth and final chapter focuses on the 1958 World Fair in Brussels, in which all three countries were involved. It examines the built pavilions of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, as well as the unrealized project for the Polish pavilion. These are interpreted as three different endpoints for the trajectories of synthesis outlined in the previous chapters, which arguably corresponded to three distinct visions of “communism with a human face.” It is important to note that all practices examined here, even the most experimental ones from Poland and Yugoslavia, were still firmly inscribed within the official state culture. This was a brief period between Stalinism and the constitution of a separate, “non-conformist” sphere in Eastern European culture, which is often the main focus of current art history on the region.²⁷ Rather than espousing the common binary between an implicitly stagnant official culture and a vital,

²⁶ This sharp historical focus is inspired by recent studies in postwar history. See for example Carole Fink, Frank Hadler and Tomasz Schramm eds, *1956: European and Global Perspectives*, (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2006). The book focuses on a single year, which is examined from a number of geographical perspectives touching upon a number of coinciding events, such as the Hungarian revolution, the Suez crisis etc.

²⁷ Exhibitions of Contemporary Eastern European art are characteristic of this: See for example Christine Macel and Joanna Mytkowska, eds., *Promises of the Past: a Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2010); Massimiliano Gioni, Jarrett Gregory, and Sarah Valdez eds., *Ostalgie* (New York: New Museum, 2011); As well *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2015.

underground one, this dissertation posits a more complex relationship between art and politics in Eastern Europe, at a historical moment when it was still possible, perhaps for one last time, to be both committed to the avant-garde and a card-carrying communist.

As a result of Khrushchev's Secret Speech and the ensuing revolts in Poland and Hungary, the year 1956 is habitually interpreted as a historical boundary that separates two irreconcilable eras. The very process of transition between the two is often insufficiently addressed.²⁸ By examining the few years before and after this important date, this dissertation aims at a better understanding of the historical processes of 1956, and especially the connection between political and aesthetic change. In addition, it seeks to explore the continuities between Stalinism and the Thaw that are still often a taboo in Eastern European historiography, in which the Thaw is frequently viewed as a new beginning and a complete break with Stalinism.

Much of Western literature on the Eastern European 1950s tends to approach the area as a unified political entity within the larger Cold War binary, simplifying the nuances mentioned above. Within the countries involved, the status of the current research on the art and architecture of the period varies greatly, and often reflects diverging contemporary attitudes towards state socialism. In Russia, the art and architecture of the Khrushchev era still tends to be ignored, since it falls between the Stalinist period, which is attracting increasing attention, and the later unofficial practices of the 1970s and 1980s that are being reclaimed by current research and exhibitions.²⁹ In Poland, there is a significant surge of interest in the avant-garde culture of the Thaw, yet the Stalinist period is still seen as traumatic. As a result, the problem of the underlying

²⁸ An example of this from Poland is the large survey exhibition on the art of the Thaw: Piotr Piotrowski, ed., *Odwilż: sztuka ok. 1956 r.* (Poznan: Muzeum Narodowe, 1996). The exhibition treated 1956 as the absolute ground zero, and glossed over any continuities with the Stalinist period.

²⁹ The most indicative of the latter is the Moscow Conceptualism of the 1970s and 1980s, which is now frequently exhibited in Russia and abroad.

continuities between the two, which is a key focus here, remains largely a taboo.³⁰ In the former Yugoslav republics, however, the 1950s and 1960s are often seen today as a golden era, especially in comparison to the civil wars and the country's violent dissolution in the 1990s. The past decade has seen a surge of interest in the art and architecture of the period, which has led to a large number of publications and exhibitions, as well as an increased activity surrounding the historical conservation of postwar Yugoslav architecture.³¹ Yet it is problematic that much of this research reframes this material within newly forged national art histories (Croatian, Serbian etc.), a tendency that contradicts the beliefs of most artists and architects involved, who showed no attachment to any particular national identity and operated within the supranational context of socialist Yugoslavia.³²

By avoiding both the binary framework of the Cold War and the narrow focus on a national history, this dissertation seeks to carve a space between the two perspectives. This allows for a better grasp of a key issue in twentieth-century history: the gradual rejection of all visions of mass utopia that, as Susan Buck-Morss has consistently argued, is not simply a national or regional issue, but a global one.³³ While the spectacular collapse of 1989 tends to condition the way in which this history is told, in the late 1950s the fate of utopia was still not

³⁰ The fraught contemporary attitudes towards the socialist era have given rise to many debates on the historic preservation of important examples of Polish socialist modern architecture; many key buildings, such as *Supersam* in Warsaw, were recently demolished, to great outcry from the architectural community. See David Crowley, "The Ruins of Socialism: Reconstruction and Destruction in Warsaw," in *Power and Architecture: The Construction of Capitals and the Politics of Space*, ed. Michael Minkenberg (New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2014): 208-226.

³¹ See, for example Ljiljana Kolečnik, ed., *Socialism and Modernity: Art, Culture, Politics, 1950-1974*. (Zagreb: Muzej Suvremene Umjetnosti, 2012); The Zagreb fairgrounds and some modernist buildings of New Belgrade were recently listed, and research on them features regularly in journals such as *Beogradsko Nasledje*.

³² Some examples are Ljiljana Kolečnik, *Između istoka i zapada: hrvatska umjetnost i likovna kritika 50-ih godina* (Zagreb: Institut za Povijest Umjetnosti, 2006); Jasna Galjer, *Design of the Fifties in Croatia: from Utopia to Reality* (Zagreb: Horetzky, 2003).

³³ Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

decided, and many competing visions for the future emerged. This is the motivation for focusing on Eastern Europe: not in order to constitute it as a separate subfield within art and architectural history, but to use it as a way to speak to larger issues pertaining to the history of modernism as a whole. Concurrent with the historical transformations outlined here, a fundamental shift occurred in art production in the late 1950s away from the medium-specific works of painting and sculpture and towards post-medium practices such as happenings and environments. As is well known today, this was the case not only in Western Europe and North America, but also in socialist Eastern Europe, Latin America, Japan, and elsewhere. From a Western perspective, the emergence of these art forms is often seen as related to the exhaustion of an increasingly self-reflexive modernism, which was accelerated by the prosperity and consumerism of the period, as well as the new, radical politics of the 1960s. Yet the sociopolitical conditions under socialism were different, as were the dominant aesthetic theories. This dissertation proposes the trope of the synthesis of the arts as a catalyst for the emergence of post-medium specificity in Eastern Europe. In the constant search for integrating architecture and the arts into a cohesive whole, some more radical propositions, inspired by the utopian ideals of a classless society, led to abolishing the distinctions between mediums altogether.

In this context, the disciplinary separation between architectural history and art history, which arguably has grown since the 1950s, is untenable when studying the material in question. Western institutional structures have allowed, or even encouraged, the professional division between artists and architects. This is not to say that Western architects did not have the option to paint, or that sculptors could not design buildings; these just tended to be kept as separate activities. In postwar Eastern Europe, however, the hybrid position of the artist-architect was often the only option for those committed to experimentation, as it allowed them to navigate the

restrictions imposed on each field by official bodies. As will be discussed in the following chapters, “impure” activities that combined art and architecture, for example exhibition design, attracted some of the key figures of this story, such as Jerzy Sołtan, Oskar Hansen and Vjenceslav Richter.³⁴ Rather than producing separate bodies of work in art and architecture, they engaged in a range of practices that combined them. Due to the institutional separation between architectural history and art history, such activities have remained in a blind spot for decades. To address this, and perhaps mirroring its subject matter, this dissertation thus also proposes a synthesis of these two separate modes of inquiry.

³⁴ Sołtan differs slightly from the rest of the group, since he increasingly became a “pure” architect after his move to the US in 1959 to assume an academic position at Harvard, something that perhaps reinforces the argument made here.

CHAPTER 1: USSR

On the Lenin Hills, 1953 / 1958

On June 1st 1962 Nikita Khrushchev inaugurated the new Palace of the Pioneers on the scenic Lenin Hills at the outskirts of Moscow [Fig. 1.1].¹ Commissioned by the Komsomol (the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League) the complex was destined for the use of the future Soviet model citizens, the Pioneers – the socialist equivalent of the Boy Scouts. Felix Novikov, a member of the team of young architects that designed the Palace, recalls Khrushchev’s enthusiastic approval of the project: “What you have done here is very good, very good. I like the inventions of the architects and artists. [...] I consider this building to be a good example of skill, as well as architectural and artistic taste.”² Initially designed in 1958, the complex was the clearest manifestation of the recent about-face in Soviet architecture, away from Stalinist historicism and towards a type of modernism that appeared closer to contemporary Western models.³ By praising the architects’ taste, Khrushchev was expressing his satisfaction with this change, which he had himself spearheaded in the few years prior. Stalinist architecture had produced “palaces for the people,” as the extravagant stations of the Moscow metro were famously known, with their grand marble stairs, golden mosaics and luxurious detailing in bronze and stone [Fig. 1.2].⁴ Yet, this new Palace was anything but palatial in that conventional

¹ The area is currently called Sparrow Hills (*Vorob’evy gory*), having reverted to its pre-Soviet name.

² Feliks Novikov and Vladimir Belogolovskii, *Soviet Modernism, 1955-1985* (Yekaterinburg: Tatlin Publishers, 2010), 18. See also Vladimir Belogolovskii, *Felix Novikov: Architect of the Soviet Modernism* (Berlin: DOM publishers, 2013), 25-51.

³ For more on the Palace of the Pioneers, see Susan E. Reid, “Khrushchev’s Children’s Paradise: The Pioneer Palace, Moscow, 1958-62,” *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, ed. David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (New York: Berg Publishers, 2002): 141-80.

⁴ See the Soviet propaganda publications of the time, such as A. Kosarev, *Kak my stroili metro* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Istoriya fabrik i zavodov, 1935) and A. Kosarev, *Istoriya metro Moskvyy*, (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Istoriya fabrik i zavodov, 1935).

sense: it consisted of unassuming, low-rise structures built from prefabricated glass and cement elements.⁵ The various buildings were clearly differentiated according to their functions (classrooms, auditorium, planetarium, cafeteria etc.) and were arranged asymmetrically around a courtyard without a dominant axis, respecting the contours and the existing vegetation of the plot [Fig. 1.3]. This was in stark contrast to the historicist compositions that dominated Stalinist architecture, an example of which is the project for the same Palace of the Pioneers by Ivan Zholtovskii [Fig. 1.4, 1.5], a staunch classicist whose work spans the first half of the century, becoming particularly popular under Stalin. His version of the Palace consisted of two symmetrical wings flanking a monumental porticoed entrance facing a rectangular courtyard – a properly “palatial” design.

The built project was conceived by a team of young architects: Viktor Egerev, Vladimir Kubasov, Felix Novikov, Boris Palui, Igor Pokrovskii and Mikhail Khazhakyan. In the monograph on the Palace published shortly after its completion, the architects emphasized their conscious departure from what they called “false classical” forms, and directly contrasted their work with Zholtovskii’s.⁶ They defended their choice of a free plan by comparing their Palace to a pioneer’s camp, where various tents serving distinct functions would occupy a natural terrain without seeking to dominate it.⁷ According to the architects, the differentiation of buildings according to their distinct functions, as well as the respect of the preexisting terrain, created a

⁵ Novikov reports that when the project was presented to the executive committee of the Mossovet (the city administration of Moscow) for approval, one of its members exclaimed: “Is this a palace? Don’t we know what palaces should look like?” to which Jozef Loveyko, the chief architect of Moscow at the time, responded: “With this example we are going to teach you to understand the new architecture!” Belogolovskii, *ibid.*, 26-27.

⁶ Viktor Egerev et al., *Moskovskii dvorets pionerov* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo literatury po stroitel’stvu, 1964), 5.

⁷ Susan E. Reid interprets the canopy above the main entrance, supported by slender columns, as another reference to a camp: it appears like a flap raised to form the entrance to a tent. Reid, “Khrushchev’s Children’s Paradise,” 165.

“picturesque” (*zhivopisnoe*) effect, a word that is frequently repeated in their account. At the same time, they defended their choices based on more pragmatic criteria: they contended that the Palace of the Pioneers was more economic since it relied on prefabrication and modern materials, which they explicated in great detail.⁸ “Standardization is the necessary condition of contemporary industrialized construction,” they proclaimed.⁹

Yet despite this emphasis on economical, standardized construction, the Palace was also replete with extensive murals, which lay outside such strictly practical, functionalist considerations. They ranged from smaller, playful compositions in the interior (such as the metal reliefs of various constellations at the planetarium’s foyer [Fig. 1.6]) to large, monumental compositions in the exterior, most notably the “Young Leninists” mosaic on the main entrance [Fig. 1.7]. Rendered in large irregular ceramic tiles in yellow, orange and ultramarine hues, it depicts groups of pioneers in varying scales (complete with their insignia, the bugle and the neck scarf), engaging in activities such as sports, performing arts, model-making or scientific experimentation. Near the center, a large profile of Lenin dominates the composition, along with a group of “young Leninists” of different ethnicities sitting around a campfire.¹⁰ By stylizing the figures and rendering them in flat, high-contrast outlines, the composition resisted the classicist tendencies of Socialist Realism without entirely breaking with it, maintaining a clearly legible figuration charged with ideological content.

In other parts of the complex, this departure from the naturalistic figuration of the Stalin era was taken further. The cement relief frieze adorning the awning of the auditorium is an

⁸ *Moskovskii dvorets pionerov*, *ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰ The depiction of multiple races and ethnicities united in a single group is a common trope in postwar Soviet art, reflecting the renewed interest in the Asian regions of the Union, as well as the regime’s purported tolerance of cultural difference, which was often contrasted with the state of US Civil rights in Soviet propaganda.

almost abstract, quasi-futurist composition of dynamic lines, with the only recognizable motifs being certain musical instruments, such as a pioneer bugle, a clarinet and a violin [Fig. 1.8].¹¹ Entitled “Music,” this work conveys the function of the building behind it, yet comes close to non-objectivity – perhaps taking license from the historic associations between abstract painting and music (such as in the case of Kandinsky) – while the presence of the instruments implied that the abstract shapes were “depictions” of sounds. Of all the other murals in the Palace, this is the closest to contemporary Western examples of the synthesis of the arts, such as those compiled in Paul Damaz’s anthology.¹² Its proportions and placement are similar to Amerigo Tot’s aluminum frieze on the main entrance of Rome’s Termini station (completed in 1953) [Fig. 1.9], a work that Felix Novikov must have seen on his trip to Italy in 1957, as part of an officially organized tour by a group of young Soviet architects.¹³

On the neighboring east wall of the main building, pioneer insignia such as the bugle, the campfire and the star were yet again stylized and superimposed on a structure of dynamic diagonals framing similarly abstracted motifs relating to pioneer activities, such as musical instruments, a campsite and images of plants and animals [Fig. 1.10]. Finally, on the south side, three compositions made of glazed colored bricks, which form the regular masonry, depict the themes of earth, water and sky, in a rather naïf style reminiscent of children’s drawings, thus referring to the contents of the classes conducted behind them [Fig. 1.11]. In the monograph on the complex, the architects particularly extolled this technique, because it was integral to the

¹¹ The frieze’s abstraction is significant, given the problematic status that abstraction still held in the Soviet Union, despite the increasing liberalizations of the Thaw.

¹² See the discussion of Damaz’s anthology in the Introduction.

¹³ One of the most visible signs of the Thaw in architecture was the increased travel of architects abroad, albeit in the form of organized – and therefore still controlled – group trips. Novikov participated in such a trip to Italy organized by Zholtovskii, who, true to his classicist conviction, insisted on visiting only historical monuments. Some of the younger members of the group, including Novikov, made a point of visiting contemporary buildings, such as Pier Luigi Nervi’s recently completed Palazzetto dello Sport (1957). Belogolovskii, 22-23.

construction of the building and followed the standardization and industrialization of architecture, which was recently mandated by the Soviet authorities, as will be discussed below. For the architects, this proved that the use of art in architecture did not necessarily have to antagonize the new development of resource-saving construction techniques. Thus “the artist becomes a bricklayer and the bricklayer an artist,” they celebrated, a motto that touches on a core issue of the synthesis of the arts under state socialism, which is the undoing of the hierarchies of the construction site and thus the division of creative labor.¹⁴ Marx’s vision that “in a communist society there are no painters, but at most people who engage in painting among other activities” seems to find a literal realization in this merging of art-making and bricklaying.¹⁵

The architects put particular emphasis on the synthesis of the arts in their statement: “Monumental-decorative art, appearing in synthesis with architecture, enriches it, supplements it with concrete content, with concrete artistic images.”¹⁶ Thus art does not play a secondary, auxiliary role, but actively shapes the building, forming what the architects called its “ideological-artistic” image.¹⁷ Particular emphasis is put on the fact that the search for a synthesis of the arts began from the first sketches of the new Palace in 1958, and the various murals were jointly developed in conjunction with the architectural composition. The key to this process was the cooperation (*sodruzhestvo*) on equal terms between artists and architects on the construction site, yet another leitmotif of the Soviet discourse on synthesis, as will be analyzed

¹⁴ More about this on my discussion of construction sites and brigades in the following chapter.

¹⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. S. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 443.

¹⁶ *Moskovskii dvorets pionerov*, 7. On the term “monumental-decorative,” see discussion of Neiman’s lecture, below.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

below.¹⁸ Like a blackboard in a classroom, the murals of the Palace became the focal points of the complex, the carriers of ideologically charged meaning that would be otherwise absent in the stripped-down architecture. The *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, the official organ of the Komsomol (which commissioned the Palace), announced in celebration: “In this house the walls will teach.”¹⁹ Susan E. Reid has interpreted this statement as an expression of the renewed materialism of the Khrushchev era, whereby the built environment was seen as capable of affecting the psyche of the citizens.²⁰ This sentence, however, could be read more literally: through the synthesis of the arts, the walls were transmogrified into ideological instructors, imbued with abilities of direct communication and unambiguous signification that usually lay outside the purview of architecture.

Yet less than a mile away from the Palace of the Pioneers lies another institution where the walls aspired to teach through art: The Moscow State University (MSU), designed in 1949 and inaugurated in 1953 [Fig. 1.12]. Perched at the top of the Lenin Hills and rising at a height of 34 floors and 240 meters (including the spire), this colossal complex is the largest of the seven iconic Stalinist skyscrapers that dot the Moscow skyline. Known in Russian as *vysotnye zdanya* (high-rise buildings) or, colloquially, *vysotki*, they were part of a 1947 plan to surround the never-built Palace of the Soviets with tall buildings that would visually frame it by repeating its stepped silhouette at various distances, thus radically transforming the Soviet capital's skyline.²¹

¹⁸ Susan E. Reid also mentions a 1958 competition that invited young pioneers to submit design ideas, though the precise effect of it on the design process remains unclear. Reid, “Khrushchev's Children's Paradise,” 147.

¹⁹ *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, June 2nd 1962, cited in Reid, *ibid.*, 141.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

²¹ The ensemble is also known as the “Seven Sisters.” See David Sarkisyan, *Les sept tours de Moscou: les tours babyloniennes du communisme, 1935-1950* (Brussels: Europalia International, 2005). The term *vysotnye zdanya* was devised in opposition to the term skyscraper (*neboskreb*) and its American associations. Skyscrapers were seen as driven by land speculation and the maximizing of plot usage, and thus created a “chaotic” skyline. In contrast, *vysotnye zdanya* were part of an organized, total plan for a

The University's design was initially entrusted to Boris Iofan, whose projects for the Palace of Soviets emerged victorious from the series of architectural competitions held during the 1930s. Iofan intended to apply his established formula of a stepped building topped with a large statue, which he had developed in his Soviet pavilions for the world fairs of 1937 and 1939, as well as the Palace of the Soviets itself. Yet Iofan was soon removed from the project, accused of "loss of inspiration under the influence of Western decadent architecture" and was replaced by Lev Rudnev, who carried the project to completion, leading a team consisting of S. E. Chernyshev, P. V. Abrosimov, A. F. Khryakov and V. N. Nasonov.²² The team was awarded a Stalin Prize in 1949 for their work, which solidified Rudnev's reputation as one of the most prominent architects of the Stalin era.²³

Unlike Iofan, who had studied extensively in Italy in the 1910s and 1920s and was influenced by its brand of early twentieth-century neoclassicism, Lev Rudnev came from a solidly Russian background: he graduated from the pre-revolutionary Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, and was more interested in the history of Russian architecture than in classical antiquity. Rudnev and his team initially adopted many of the features of Iofan's design, such as the stepped massing of volumes, yet significantly reduced the size of the crowning sculpture [Fig. 1.13]. In the final drawings, the latter was replaced with a spire, a motif from historical Russian architecture (such as the towers of the Moscow Kremlin or the Admiralty in St.

socialist city, and often emphasized their different model of land usage by being being surrounded by vast empty spaces, as is the case of the Moscow State University or the Palace of Culture in Warsaw (discussed in the following chapter). See the definition of *vysotnye zdanya* in Y. A. Kornfel'd, *Laureaty Stalinskikh Premii v Arkhitekture 1941-1950* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo literature po stroitel'stvu i arkhitekture, 1952), 108-9.

²² *Les sept tours de Moscou*, 57.

²³ Other notable buildings by Rudnev are the Frunze Military Academy in Moscow (1939), the House of the Government of the Azerbaijan SSR in Baku (1952), as well as the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw (1952-55), which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. See also I. O. Svirskii and V. E. Ass, *Arkhitektori Rudnev* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi izdatel'stvo literatury po stroitel'stvu, arkhitekture, i stroitel'nym materialam, 1963).

Petersburg), which would then be repeated in most other Moscow high-rises.²⁴ This dramatically altered the relationship between art and architecture in the new edifice; whereas Iofan's model relied on both of them equally, conceiving of the building as a podium for the sculpture, Rudnev clearly prioritized architecture, relegating the sculptures (which were still abundant) to a secondary position of surface embellishment. Although most of them were well over life-size and were produced by the esteemed workshop of Vera Mukhina [Fig. 1.14], they appear as miniature ornaments compared to the vast scale of the building.²⁵ Any thematic consistency is lost, as well as the many colors of the ornaments in majolica [Fig. 1.15], which from a distance are subsumed by the pink hue of the ceramic revetment of the walls. Rudnev's conception of the relationship between art and architecture is thus as hierarchical as the silhouette of the building itself, something that was noted by many of his Soviet critics, as discussed below.

The comparison of the MSU to the Palace of the Pioneers clearly demonstrates that between 1953, the year of MSU's completion, and 1958, when the design for the Palace of the Pioneers was finalized, a swift transformation of Soviet architectural culture took place. Despite their temporal and spatial proximity, the two complexes seem sharply divided along binaries: vertical / horizontal, historicist / modernist, extravagant / economical, monumental / picturesque etc. Divided by five years and three large city blocks, they seem to belong to distant eras – and this was as striking then as it is now. A 1958 article in the American journal *Architectural Record* surveyed the latest Soviet architectural press and discovered projects by young architects similar in style to the Palace of the Pioneers, which embraced simplified modernist forms in

²⁴ A well-known anecdote from the time describes Stalin's first encounter with the high-rise at Smolenskaya street, when he asked about the absence of a spire. This which quickly prompted the architects to add one. See Vladimir Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two*, trans. John Hill and Roann Barris (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²⁵ Mukhina had collaborated with Iofan for the Soviet pavilion of the Paris World Fair of 1937, for which she created the iconic *Rabochii i Kolhoznitsa* (male worker and female farmer at a collective farm) that topped it. See the discussion of the 1954 conference on the synthesis of the arts below.

glass and steel and stood in stark contrast with the Stalinist historicism that most Westerners expected to see.²⁶ By the mid-1960s, the Palace of the Pioneers had become a showcase for the new Soviet architecture and was visited by international luminaries such as Alvar Aalto and Lucio Costa, as well as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.²⁷ As attested by Felix Novikov, the two French philosophers were particularly intrigued by what they saw as a sudden about-face, and asked the Palace's architects how it came about.

A quick answer to their question is that the rejection of Stalinist architecture and the establishment of what is now sometimes termed "Soviet Modernism" was a direct consequence of the political de-Stalinization that shook the Eastern bloc in 1956. Yet a close examination of the sequence of events leading up to that moment challenges the presumption that political change follows aesthetic change; in fact, the two processes were closely intertwined, and often public discussions on art and architecture led the way for a change of tone in politics.²⁸ In addition, de-Stalinization proceeded at varying paces within the different fields of visual production: while in architecture it was swift and definitive, seemingly overthrowing the status quo overnight, in other mediums (such as easel painting), the transformations were significantly more gradual. Socialist Realism, albeit somewhat moderated, was the norm for many years to come, while abstraction remained largely taboo. Such intertwining of aesthetics and politics is also evident in the Russian word often used at the time to describe the political reforms of the period, which is none other than *perestroika*. Literally meaning reconstruction (stemming from the verb *stroit'* – to build), the term carries an inherent architectural metaphor. Although today it

²⁶ Gerald Gruman, "Soviet Architecture: Does It Have a New Look?" *Architectural Record* 123, no. 3 (1958): 16, 322.

²⁷ Novikov, *Soviet Modernism*, 18.

²⁸ This straightforward causal relationship between the political Thaw and the re-emergence of modernism in the Eastern bloc persists in many recent art histories of the field, such as Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989* (London: Reaktion, 2009).

is mostly associated with Mikhail Gorbachev's new policies from the second half of the 1980s, it had previously often been used to refer to political reforms in the Soviet Union, already since Stalin's First Five-Year Plan of 1928.²⁹

Unlike revolution, which seeks a complete change of direction, the task of reform is to negotiate a balance between continuity and change, in this case between continuing the utopian project while ridding it of its crimes. At a time when both the political and aesthetic excesses of Stalinism had become undeniable, the greater question was now how to overcome them, all the while deciding which aspects of the *ancien régime* ought to be preserved. Here lies a strong undercurrent of continuity between the two complexes on the Lenin Hills, the MSU and the Palace of the Pioneers: while formally as different as they could be, both made extensive use of art – and in fact the interrelation between art and architecture was their main organizing principle, greatly determining their final composition. In both cases, art was expected to provide architecture with ideological content to educate the Soviet citizen, thus serving a greater social purpose. The theoretical basis for the synthesis of the arts, as formulated by the architects of the Palace of the Pioneers, could easily have applied to the MSU as well. While the synthesis of the arts (*sintez iskusstv*) became at the time the crux of public discussions on art and architecture, leading the transition from one era to the other, it was also a constant, the one element of the Stalinist artistic legacy that ought to survive the reforms. It was seen as a necessary condition for a socialist aesthetics, since it encapsulated four key issues: architecture's status as an art and its ability to signify, the social purpose of art under socialism, the power relations inherent in artistic collaboration, as well as the balance between artistic freedom and social engagement. As Khrushchev's de-Stalinization sought to reform the Soviet system in order to preserve its basic

²⁹ See Danilo Udovički-Selb, *The Evolution of Soviet Architectural Culture in the First Decade of Stalin's 'Perestroika'* (Trondheim: Norwegian Univ. of Science and Technology, 2009).

premises, the artists and architects of the time remained attached to the imperative for synthesis by seeking new ways of articulating it, as made evident by the transition between the MSU and the Palace of the Pioneers. Both were processes of reform, struggling to improve upon the aesthetics and politics of mass utopia, at a time when more future paths suddenly became possible following the death of Stalin.

Re-Forms, 1954-56

De-Stalinization began on the evening of February 25th 1956 when, in a closed-doors session of the twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev delivered his famous Secret Speech, an extended, trenchant and unwavering condemnation of Joseph Stalin, who had died almost three years prior.³⁰ The new Soviet leader spoke in great detail about the show trials, purges and mass deportations that had taken place under his predecessor's reign, citing specific testimonies of those who suffered. For Khrushchev, Stalin was capricious, irritable and brutal – character flaws that became disastrous when all the powers in the Soviet Union were concentrated in his hands.³¹ This was the crux of Khrushchev's critique: the “cult of individuality” (often translated in English as “cult of personality”) characterizing Stalin's reign, that is, the tendency “to elevate one person, to transform him into a superman possessing supernatural characteristics akin to those of a god. Such man supposedly knows everything, sees everything, thinks for everyone, can do anything, is infallible in his behavior.”³² This was diametrically opposed to what Khrushchev saw as a fundamental Leninist

³⁰ The speech is reproduced in Nikita S. Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Speaks: Selected Speeches, Articles, and Press Conferences, 1949-1961*, ed. Thomas P. Whitney (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 212 and 245.

³² *Ibid.*, 213.

principle, that of collective party leadership: “collegiality of leadership flows from the very nature of our party, a party built on the principles of democratic centralism.”³³

The Secret Speech even challenged the widespread perception that Stalin should be personally credited with the Soviet victory in the Second World War: “Our historic victories were attained thanks to the organizational work of the Party, to the many local organizations, and to the self-sacrificing work of our great people. These victories are the result of the great drive and activity of the people and the Party as a whole; they are not at all the fruit of Stalin's leadership, as was pictured during the period of the cult of the individual leader.”³⁴ By presenting Soviet accomplishments as products of Stalin’s genius, Soviet historiography had thus succumbed to the cult of Stalin, contradicting Marxist interpretations of history that prioritized collective, socioeconomic factors as the driving forces behind historical development.³⁵ Even the common practice of naming cities, factories and other infrastructure after political leaders and party cadres was flawed according to Khrushchev, since it relied on bourgeois conceptions of private property that were foreign to the modest, collectivist ethos of Lenin and the Bolsheviks.³⁶

In this view, Stalin’s core crime, from which all other crimes stemmed, was his disrespect for collectivism, a crucial aberration from Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. For Khrushchev, this cult of individuality spread like a disease in Soviet society, whereby “the arbitrary behavior of one person encouraged and permitted arbitrariness in others.”³⁷ In his conclusion, the new leader called the Party to action, to “examine critically from the Marxist-Leninist viewpoint and to correct the widespread, erroneous views connected with the cult of the individual leader in the spheres of history, philosophy, economics and other sciences, as well as in literature and the fine

³³ Ibid., 218 and 220.

³⁴ Ibid., 259 and 243.

³⁵ Ibid., 255.

³⁶ Ibid., 263.

³⁷ Ibid., 215.

arts.”³⁸ The new period of de-Stalinization would thus be defined by a critical enterprise, which analyzed the Soviet system “from within,” using the basic precepts of Marxism-Leninism in order to improve it, but not overthrow it. The process was essentially a continuation and generalization of *samokritika* (self-critique), a cornerstone of Soviet political culture that played the role of confession within what has been described as a secular religion - itself distorted by the forced confessions of the Stalinist show trials in the late 1930s.³⁹ This introspection was complemented by retrospection, a renewed interest in the early years of the Revolution and the legacy of Lenin. Thus, “bad” Stalinism had to be pried away from “good” Leninism; yet ironically, in the process of undoing the cult of Stalin, the cult of Lenin - initially established by Stalin - was further solidified.

Most importantly, de-Stalinization should not be limited to politics, but, much like Stalinism that it sought to undo, should encompass every aspect of life, including culture. From 1956 onwards, shifts became palpable in literature as well as the visual and performing arts, often creating stark before-and-after contrasts, such as the one between the Moscow State University and the Palace of the Pioneers analyzed above. At a time of intense political and economic transformations, such contrasts became the visual manifestation of the Thaw, instantly recognizable as signs of the greater reform of Soviet society.⁴⁰ Indeed, “reform” is a key term for

³⁸ Ibid., 264.

³⁹ It is important to note that *samokritika* ought to be public, and was thus a ritualized self-critique. See J. Arch Getty, “*Samokritika* Rituals in the Stalinist Central Committee, 1933-1938,” *Russian Review* vol. 58 no. 1 (January 1999): 49-70. The description of communism as a secular religion has a long, if not contested history. This was often a focus of the scholarly journal *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, established in 2000, which was eventually renamed *Politics, Religion & Ideology* in 2011. See for example, Klaus-Georg Riegel, “Marxism-Leninism as a Political Religion,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6, no. 1 (June 2005): 97-126 and Hans Maier, “Political Religion: A Concept and Its Limitations,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8, no. 1 (March 2007): 5-16.

⁴⁰ Arguably a similar operation took place after the October Revolution: the radical break in many aspects of artistic production signified the dawn of a new historical era.

understanding the period: the various searches for a post-Stalinist, non-totalitarian form of “Communism with a Human Face” was eventually referred to as “Reform Communism.”

In the years leading to the watershed of 1956, the reformist impetus of the Thaw was first displaced onto the delimited space of art and architecture, before being extended to the society at large.⁴¹ Thus the process of reform was rehearsed on the tangible, concrete forms of art and architecture, which thus stood in for the greater sociopolitical structures of the Soviet Union. It is telling, in that respect, Ehrenburg’s emblematic novel, *Thaw*, similarly transposed political issues to the story of two painters, the state-employed Pukhov and the “outsider” Saburov. Significantly, the book was published in the spring of 1954, just one year after Stalin’s death and two full years before Khrushchev’s Secret Speech.

At about the same time that Ehrenburg’s novel was first published in the pages of the magazine *Novy Mir*, a three-day symposium on the synthesis of the arts was co-organized by the Union of Soviet Architects and the Union of Soviet Artists in Moscow.⁴² Held in March 1954, this meeting of art historians, architects, as well as decorative and fine artists, provided the opportunity to look back and reflect upon Stalinist aesthetics, and thus became one of the first signs of the upcoming de-Stalinization of Soviet art and architecture. Due to the inherently slower pace of architectural production, which often involves long delays between a project’s first conception and its inauguration, many of the most iconic projects of the late Stalinist style were still being erected, such as the reopened and expanded All-Union Agricultural Exhibition [Fig. 1.16], the Circle Line of the Moscow Metro [Fig. 1.2] and the Volga-Don canal [Fig. 1.17]. With few new commissions coming in (except for the eventually unrealized Pantheon, that was intended to house, among others, Stalin’s own tomb), and with no clearly discernible signs of a

⁴¹ Vladimir Paperny argues that Stalinism was first and better articulated in visual form, such as in the designs for the Palace of the Soviets, than in philosophy. See *Culture Two*, 90.

⁴² Russian Archives of Art and Literature (RGALI) 2606/2/361.

new, post-Stalinist direction in either aesthetics or politics, the conference participants seized the opportunity to engage in *samokritika*, or self-critique, of the failures and accomplishments of the Stalinist period, in a manner that prefigures Khrushchev's own endeavor in his Secret Speech two years later.

It should be noted here that the Soviet criticism of art and architecture at the time differs significantly from parallel models in the West. Due to the public, ritualized culture of *samokritika*, conferences and symposia became the privileged site for critical discourse. The ideas expressed in them were gradually filtered through official journals and other publications and, through repetition and dissemination, they were solidified into official positions, often in the form of official decrees, as will be discussed below. Yet, as attested by the stenographic accounts preserved in archives, many of the speeches were rather daring and often ventured outside established orthodoxies, something that was usually excised in their subsequent dissemination to a wider audience, when they were summarized in the press. A comparison with Khrushchev's Secret Speech is useful here: intended for a limited audience and never meant to be widely distributed, it was surprisingly frank and direct in its criticism of Stalin — arguably more so than any official document of the period that followed.

The choice of the synthesis of the arts as the theoretical crux of the 1954 conference is telling. The term's vagueness and positive connotations meant that, despite their differences, all the conference participants could agree that a synthesis of the arts was indeed highly desirable. Transcending more transient aesthetic categories such as style, the concept could be used to describe such disparate phenomena as Lenin's classicist 1918 plan for monumental propaganda, the earlier Stalinist icons of the Moscow metro and the 1937 Soviet pavilion in Paris, and eventually the Socialist-Modernist architecture and design that would gradually emerge in the

years to come. In addition, the synthesis of the arts could be located in numerous examples from the history of art, from Egyptian reliefs to the Parthenon frieze, and from Gothic cathedrals to Renaissance palaces, thus legitimizing the current discourse by assigning it a long and illustrious historical pedigree. The point of contention in the conference was the precise form of the aspired synthesis of the arts: what should be the relationship between artists, architects and engineers? Should there be a hierarchy between architecture, fine and decorative arts? Should the existing institutional structures, such as schools, academies and professional associations, be reformed to create more fertile conditions for the emergence of synthesis?

The first day of the conference consisted of a keynote lecture by the architect Leonid M. Polyakov, who was highly esteemed for his work on the Volga-Don canal, the Stalinist mega-project par excellence that incorporated monumental sculpture and architecture into an engineering feat that connected the two Russian rivers. In his speech, Polyakov posited the synthesis of the arts as the central issue in the theory and practice of Soviet art. In his view, the integration of art into architecture that is mandated by synthesis stands in direct opposition with bourgeois conceptions of “art for art’s sake,” which involved mobile objects-commodities that were subjected to market forces – a model for artistic production that Soviet aesthetics had sought to overcome from the very beginning.

A key point of reference for Polyakov was Lenin’s Plan for Monumental Propaganda from 1918-19. The plan involved the demolition of czarist public sculptures and their replacement with new ones that would commemorate the heroes of the revolution, mostly rendered in a similarly classicist figuration [Fig. 1.18], although some cubo-futurist exceptions did exist.⁴³ As the Bolshevik leader’s first post-revolutionary initiative in the realm of art, the

⁴³ See John E. Bowlt, “Russian Sculpture and Lenin’s Plan of Monumental Propaganda,” in *Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics*, ed. Henry A. Millon and Linda Nochlin (Cambridge, MA; London:

plan loomed large in the imaginary of Soviet artists for many decades. Its attachment to figuration and to traditional forms of commemorative sculpture were eventually interpreted as a legitimization of Socialist Realism, while its insistence on the propagandistic and commemorative role of art was seen as an essential step towards jettisoning bourgeois conceptions of art as a solitary, contemplative practice chiefly motivated by the artists' subjective expression.

Polyakov's reference to Lenin's plan is not unique in this period. Many more speeches in the conference followed suit, as well as in publications throughout the 1950s, peaking in 1958, the plan's fortieth anniversary. Much like Khrushchev's Thaw sought inspiration and legitimation in Lenin's era, so the artists and architects of the period looked at the 1918 plan as the foundation of Soviet aesthetics, free from what were considered the "formalist" heresies of the Constructivists that followed it, but also from the excesses of the Stalinist style that were now under such intense scrutiny.

In 1954, only the first glimmers of this scrutiny emerged, against the background of an ongoing architectural and artistic production, in which the highly ornate forms of postwar Socialist Realism were still dominant. Despite praising the more somber 1918 plan, Polyakov singled out the almost rococo Komsomol'skaya station at the Moscow metro's Circle Line [Fig. 1.2] as the best contemporary example of the synthesis of the arts. Designed by a team led by Alexei Shchusev, it was inaugurated in 1952 and arguably featured the most opulent interior of all other stations of the Moscow metro: its vaulted main hall was replete with rosettes and floral ornaments in stucco, while an extensive series of ceiling mosaics rendered in gold and bright colors depicted Soviet emblems and victories. The new metro station was strategically positioned

MIT Press, 1978): 182-193; Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1983), 53-55; V. P. Tolstoi, *Leninskii plan monumental'noi propagandy v deistvii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Khudozhestv SSSR, 1961). The latter is a small pamphlet that attempts to draw a direct line from figurative, realist monuments of the 1920s all the way to 1959 and works such as the colossal statue of Mayakovsky on the Moscow square named after him.

underneath the square with the same name, where most visitors to Moscow from other parts of the Soviet Union would first arrive, as the Leningrad, Yaroslavl' and Kazan railway stations all converge there. The splendid materials evoked an imperial grandeur, signifying to visitors that they had arrived to the center of an empire that stretched across half of the northern hemisphere. Without delving into the kind of detailed analysis that characterized other parts of his speech, Polyakov gauged the success of the station's approach to synthesis by the crowds of Muscovites that flocked to admire it after it opened, and its seeming popularity ever since.⁴⁴ He offered lengthy praise of Pavel Dmitrievich Korin, who led the mosaics workshop, and contrasted them with his work for the Moscow State University. According to Polyakov, the University mosaics, although of a similarly high quality, suffered from their placement, since they were overshadowed by the colossal scale of the architecture and thus failed to create the striking effect of Komsomol'skaya.⁴⁵ For Polyakov, the University building had also failed in its incorporation of sculptural elements. Once again, this was a problem of scale: the endless repetition of reliefs and free-standing sculptures turned such works into mere ornaments within the context of the gigantic building – despite being often larger than life size. This type of arrangement was bourgeois, proclaimed Polyakov, perhaps alluding to such uses of sculpture in nineteenth-century historicist architecture.⁴⁶

The criticism of the Moscow State University provided Polyakov with an opportunity to publicly criticize his own profession, a type of architectural *samokritika*. In his view, the central issue for the synthesis of the arts was the nature of the collaboration between artists and

⁴⁴ The station is still considered the magnum opus of the Moscow metro by most contemporary travel guides to the Russian capital and often features in the list of top sights.

⁴⁵ RGALI, *ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁶ RGALI, *ibid.*, 15. While he does not elaborate further, Polyakov seems to draw the line between “bad” bourgeois historicism and “good” socialist-realist historicism in the legibility of the ensemble's political context. On Soviet criticism of historicism, see the discussion of the final Palace of the Soviets competition below.

architects, and whether their relationship is imbued by a spirit of collectivism.⁴⁷ He lamented the tendency to invite artists after the building is done to fill up the available space, often resulting in mismatched combinations between art and architecture, such as the one that he observed at the Moscow State University. In his own effort at self-critique, Polyakov conceded that it was often the architects who imposed a hierarchical, anti-collectivist structure on artist-architect collaborations, positioning themselves at the top. Furthermore, he castigated his colleagues who considered monumental-decorative art as secondary, thus discouraging young artists from getting involved in it. Finally, Polyakov stated that art should not be employed to conceal a lack of ideas in architecture, thereby perhaps alluding to the decorative excesses of late Stalinist architecture; Instead he praised the work of Alexey Shchusev, who successfully employed art in his buildings that spanned the first half of the twentieth century, ranging from neoclassicism and art nouveau to his own version of Constructivism as well as historicist Stalinist styles.

However, Polyakov did eventually defend the primacy of architecture, by comparing architects to dramaturgs and music composers, who orchestrate various elements produced by other authors in order to create a greater work that combines them. Glossing over the problem of non-hierarchical collaboration, Polyakov stated that such issues should be resolved by a collective striving for the same ideal, which is none other than Socialist Realism. In a rhetorical balancing act that is typical of this moment of transition, Polyakov stated that the firm attachment to the principles of Socialist Realism should not result in eclecticism (*eklektizm*), which he squarely rejected, but should instead lead to innovation (*novatorstvo*).⁴⁸

⁴⁷ RGALI, *ibid.*, 9 and 23-24.

⁴⁸ RGALI, *ibid.*, 10. Eclecticism (*eklektizm*) becomes a key negative term in the criticism of the time: it refers to the frivolous and subjective use of historical elements, as opposed to a politically motivated and self-conscious engagement with history. See the discussion of the 1957 and 1959 competitions for the Palace of the Soviets below.

This type of discourse is typical of the reformism of the Thaw: while rushing to declare allegiance to long-established orthodoxies (such as Marxism-Leninism, Socialist Realism etc.) it also engages in a carefully balanced self-critique, in the hopes that new and better conditions could emerge from it. Since its official establishment at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers, the dogma of Socialist Realism was formulated as an abstract theoretical construct that could apply to all arts, rather than a set of concrete formal guidelines. These were subsequently elaborated during Stalin's reign in different ways for each art, starting with literature and eventually reaching non-verbal forms of creation, such architecture and the visual arts. In practice, Socialist Realism was associated with idealized figuration in painting and sculpture, and a highly eclectic form of historicism in architecture. With his ambivalent statement, Polyakov sought to break this habitual association between Socialist Realism and eclecticism, in order to salvage the former from irrelevance while allowing for the overcoming of the latter. This operation is similar to the one attempted by Khrushchev two years later, when he sought to break the link between Leninism and Stalinism in order to preserve the former and supersede the latter.

The second day of the conference consisted of a lecture entitled "Monumental and Monumental-Decorative Sculpture," delivered by T. Neiman, a doctoral candidate in art history, who was apparently working on a dissertation on contemporary monuments and their employment of the synthesis of the arts.⁴⁹ Like Polyakov, Neiman analyzed the synthesis of the arts in recently completed projects such the Moscow State University, the Volga-Don Canal and the Moscow metro stations, which he described in great detail. His particular focus was the monumental ensembles (*ansamblya*), which had become especially prominent after the Second

⁴⁹ Most speakers of the conference are only mentioned by their last name, and in most cases it has been impossible to locate their first names and patronymics. It is unclear why Neiman, who is otherwise unknown at the time, was chosen to deliver a long speech comparable in length to that of Polyakov, a well-established architect.

World War, when Red Army memorials were created in many parts of Central and Eastern Europe, most notably in Treptow in the outskirts of Berlin. For Neiman, such ensembles were important sites for the development of the synthesis of the arts, and had been so since the 1930s, when he located the emergence of the discourse on synthesis.

Neiman was referring to a series of publications and conferences on the synthesis of the arts from the mid-1930s that coincided with the Stalinization of Soviet architecture. Already in December 1934, the “First Creative Summit of Architects, Sculptors and Painters” was organized by the Union of Soviet Architects in Moscow, focusing on the problem of synthesis.⁵⁰ It featured extensive art-historical lectures on the synthesis of the arts through the ages, which sought to legitimize the contemporary discussions. They were delivered by art historians, such as David Efimovich Arkin, but also by esteemed contemporary practitioners such as the architect Alexey Shchusev, the muralist Vladimir Favorskii and the sculptor Vera Mukhina. In 1935, an issue of the serial publication *Voprosy Arkhitektury* (Issues of Architecture), also published by the Union of Architects, was divided into two sections: one dedicated to similar art-historical explorations of synthesis through the ages, while the other was intended to showcase its contemporary manifestations through the writings of architects.⁵¹ In this rather early stage, the architects appeared hesitant to take up the cause of synthesis, as seen in the article by Moisei Ginzburg on the main thoroughfares in Moscow and the Donbas region, which still promoted Constructivist architecture without any signs of engaging with the writings on synthesis (as published in the volume’s first section).⁵² Viewed together, the two conferences on synthesis from 1934 and 1954, along with the publications that surrounded them, mark significant moments of transition in Soviet architecture. Bookending Stalinist architecture, the trope of synthesis resurged at times

⁵⁰ The proceedings were published in 1936 as *Voprosy Sintez Iskusstv* (Moscow: Ogiz-Izogiz, 1936).

⁵¹ Soyuz Sovetskikh Arkhitektorov, *Voprosy Arkhitektury* (Moscow: Ogiz-Izogiz 1935).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 159-76.

of political and artistic transition. This was also the case with Lenin's 1918-19 Plan for Monumental Propaganda, which in both the 1930s and the 1950s was seen as the ur-synthesis of Soviet art and architecture.⁵³

One of the results of the conferences on the synthesis of the arts in the 1930s and 1950s was the establishment of the term "monumental-decorative" art, which was the focal point of Neiman's lecture in 1954. Essentially referring to the types of art that were integrated into architecture in the context of the synthesis of the arts, the term was widespread in both publications and institutional structures, such as the dedicated departments of monumental-decorative art found in many Soviet art academies since the 1930s. Yet despite such proliferation, the term appears strange today: it carries an inherent contradiction by joining together two words from seemingly opposite sides of the spectrum: the monumental and the decorative, one being associated with large scale, uniqueness, and singular authorship, and the other pointing to detailing, repetition, and anonymous creation. Both poles seem to reject the portability of the autonomous, bourgeois work of art and imply work that is firmly attached to an architectural context, and therefore a social one, away from the isolated environment of the museum. The paradox of the "monumental-decorative" expresses the role assigned to art within the Soviet discourse on synthesis: at once unique and reproducible, large and small, authored and anonymous, it was a conceptually flexible category, or, better still, dialectical. Art was to be simultaneously monumental *and* decorative, while not fully identical with either category. It is important that the term saw a resurgence during the Thaw, and became a staple of Soviet

⁵³ The first post-revolutionary years saw the rise of another, avant-garde model of synthesis, that advocated by the group ZhivSkul'ptArkh avant-garde group of 1919-1920 (from initial syllables for Painting, Sculpture and Architecture (*zhivopis'*, *skul'ptura*, *arkhitektura*)). For more on ZhivSkul'ptArkh and avant-garde ideas of synthesis, see Chapter Three. See Also Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Zhivskul'ptarkh: Pervaya tvorcheskaya organizatsiya sovetskogo arkhitekturnogo avangarda* (Moscow: Architectura, 1993).

aesthetic discourse through the 1980s, as will be discussed in the conclusion.⁵⁴ It was also a focal point of the new Soviet journal, *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo* (Decorative Art), which was founded in 1957 and covered an eclectic mix of topics, ranging from folk craft and applied arts to large-scale murals and mosaics, often within the same article.

In his lecture, Neiman spoke at great length about the sculptor Vera Mukhina, whom he considered the best representative of monumental-decorative art. One of the most prominent artists in Soviet history, Mukhina was highly decorated, earning five Stalin Prizes and the title of People's Artist of the USSR prior to her death in 1953, almost six months before the conference on the synthesis of the arts. Her most famous work, and a constant reference to all subsequent Soviet discussions on the synthesis of the arts, was the sculpture that topped Boris Iofan's Soviet pavilion at the 1937 World Fair in Paris [Fig. 1.19]. Depicting a male factory worker and a female farmer at a collective farm (*Rabochii i Kolkhoznitsa*), the colossal statue became a lasting emblem of the Soviet Union, often reproduced throughout its history, and carefully preserved and showcased to this day.⁵⁵

While Neiman sought to explain the success of *Rabochii i Kolkhoznitsa* through a detailed formal analysis of the sculpture, some of the speakers on the third day of the symposium, dedicated to a larger number of smaller talks, delved deeper into the issue, seeking to connect it to the greater problem of collaboration between artist and architect, as initially laid out by Polyakov on day one. The artist Belisheva, who had worked in Pavel D. Korin's

⁵⁴ For example, the large survey of Soviet Decorative arts, *Sovetskoe Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo* (1989), contains chapters dedicated to murals and other forms of large-scale works integrated into buildings, as well as exhibition design, along with more typical decorative arts, such as textiles, ceramics etc.

⁵⁵ Preserved at the grounds of the agricultural exhibition in Moscow (VSKhV, later renamed VDNKh, see below) since 1937, the sculpture was recently restored and positioned on top of a partial replica of the Paris pavilion, which now serves as an annex for the Manezh temporary exhibition space. This 2012 building reproduces the front part of Iofan's pavilion, complete with the friezes and other façade decorations, albeit with a tessellated pattern on the stone revetment that marks a subtle contemporary reinterpretation.

workshop for the Komsomol'skaya station mosaics, was the most vocal in this respect.⁵⁶ She deemed that the coexistence of Mukhina's sculpture with Iofan's pavilion was exemplary, because equal emphasis was given to both art and architecture, unlike the habitual subordination of the former to the latter.⁵⁷ Like Polyakov, she criticized Rudnev's Moscow State University for assigning a marginal role to art. Belisheva took Polyakov's criticism a step further, by arguing that the University's architect *dictatorially* took upon himself to determine most of the building's creative aspects, thus suppressing any initiatives by the artists. Although she agreed with Polyakov's opinion that architecture is determined by architects and monuments by sculptors, she called for the abolition of dictatorship (*diktatura*), so that a true community (*sodruzhestvo*) between artists and architects could emerge.⁵⁸

Thus unlike Polyakov and Neiman, Belisheva did not hesitate to openly politicize her speech, connecting the problem of synthesis with the greater political issue of collectivity in this immediate post-Stalinist moment. The parallel between architect and political leader was not new; in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Stalin was often hailed as the “architect of communism,” depicted in posters in front of Moscow's high-rises [Fig. 1.20]. Whereas under Stalin the parallel meant to elevate the leader to the status of an inspired, talented creator, in Belisheva's speech the simile pointed to a starker reality: architects, operating under a totalitarian regime, had become themselves dictators in miniature – and in the process had impeded the development of Soviet art and architecture, as seen in the case of Rudnev's Moscow State University.⁵⁹ In the terms of

⁵⁶ RGALI, *ibid.*, 79-80.

⁵⁷ Another example she praised, though without going into such detail, was the Volga-Don canal (architect: Leonid M. Polyakov, sculptor: Tomskii), though this could also be an effort to praise Polyakov.

⁵⁸ RGALI, *ibid.*, 82.

⁵⁹ Boris Groys has interpreted Stalin as the ultimate demiurge – author of the totality of Soviet society. See Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (London: Verso, 2011).

Khrushchev's 1956 speech, architects under Stalin had been the focus of a certain "cult of the individual," which in turn contradicted the principle of collectivism that in theory should be central to all artistic endeavors in a socialist society.

In that respect, it is significant to note that the 1937 Soviet pavilion was not just a *product* of what was imagined as a harmonious collaboration between artist and architect, but, most importantly, was an *image* of collaboration. The worker and the farmer worked together to build communism, much like the tools of their trade that they held were brought together to make a hammer and sickle, whose symbolic resonance exceeds that of the two tools that constitute it. Above all else, the *Rabochii i Kolkhoznitsa* is an image of equality, not just between the two productive classes, but also between the two genders. This was also the case with the pavilion as a whole, created by a male architect and a female sculptor, while eschewing the usual domination of (usually male) architects on artists that was decried by Belisheva in her speech. More than a complete structure that left few marginal spaces to be filled by art, as in Rudnev's "dictatorial" paradigm of synthesis, Iofan's building was in fact a stepped podium that would be incomplete without the sculpture that topped it. Iofan's most famous buildings, including the 1939 pavilion in the New York World Fair and his many iterations of the Palace of the Soviets [Fig. 1.21], all operated on the same premise: that of providing a podium for a sculpture, which assigned political meaning to the building that supported it and thus helped fulfill its ideological mission.⁶⁰

The unequivocally positive assessment of the Paris pavilion, often repeated in books and articles in the first years after Stalin's death, was itself another manifestation of the reformist tendencies of the time: judging postwar Stalinist architecture as too hierarchical and excessive –

⁶⁰ This function of architecture as a podium for sculpture will be criticized during the final competition for the Palace of the Soviets in 1957-59, when Iofan's legacy will be discredited. See below.

not unlike Stalin himself – artists, architects, and theorists drew attention to a period before this deviation, which they romanticized as an era of authentic artistic collectivism. Here lies a crucial difference between the aesthetic and the political reforms of the Soviet mid-1950s: whereas Khrushchev’s politics were inspired by Lenin’s time, the aesthetic reforms looked back to the roots of Socialist Realism in the mid-1930s, which took on a similarly originary position. Thus the experimental, avant-garde practices that developed in the late 1910s and 1920s, such as Constructivism and Productivism, were still excluded. While returning to Lenin meant solidifying the foundations of the Soviet Union, a return to the avant-garde would have meant a blow to the very core of Soviet aesthetics, which was none other than Socialist Realism. This would have risked turning the aesthetic reform of the 1950s into an aesthetic revolution, something that was undesirable, if not outright improbable at the time. In this respect, the situation in the Soviet Union during the period in question was markedly different than in its European satellites and, most saliently, in non-aligned Yugoslavia, where a rekindling of the historical avant-garde was actively sought.⁶¹

As in Khrushchev’s 1956 speech, the key issue for the less scripted talks of the third day of the conference similarly revolved around the issue of collectivism. Attempting an overarching art-historical point about the importance of synthesis, the architect Mordani related the synthesis of the arts with the problem of forming a style distinct for each era.⁶² In his view, there is no period in history when the dominant style was defined by a single artist, no matter how great he or she was. For Mordani, historical styles had always emerged from “the people,” from the *collectivity* of all artists working simultaneously on different mediums. Thus the establishment of

⁶¹ See Chapters Two and Three.

⁶² RGALI., *ibid.*, 75-76.

an Egyptian, Classical or Gothic style was a result of artists and architects working together and side-by-side on projects that joined different arts into a cohesive whole.

For A.S. Kirichenko, the collectivist imperatives of the synthesis of the arts should be translated into new Soviet institutional structures. He suggested replacing the separate academies of art and architecture with an “academy of synthetic art,” where students of art and architecture could collaborate on projects, in order to better learn how to work together after graduation. He considered the institutional division between artists and architects, much like the division of painters according to the genres they specialize in, as inherently bourgeois and thus unacceptable. Although potentially radical in its implications, Kirichenko’s suggestion stopped short of a fully articulated neo-avant-garde position that would call for the complete abolition of distinctions between mediums, as was the case in Poland and Yugoslavia at the time.⁶³ Nor did he mention the precursors of such cross-disciplinary institutions from the Soviet avant-garde, such as VKhUTEMAS, where such conditions for a “synthetic” artistic production had been indeed set up as early as 1920. Again, this was a time of reform, not revolution, and significant aspects of the established status quo needed to be upheld.

All the conference participants implicitly or explicitly agreed that there should be no deviations from the dogma of Socialist Realism, despite its multiple and often divergent interpretations. Even the most outspoken speaker, Paplin, did not question Socialist Realism’s primacy, but instead based his critique on it.⁶⁴ In a scathing tone, he questioned the term “monumental-decorative art,” implying that such a play with words belied an intellectual poverty: “Why does there have to be so many different types of terms, why all this grandiosity?”

⁶³ See the discussions of the Art and Research Workshops at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts in Chapter Two, as well as the development of Yugoslavia’s EXAT-51 and Studio of Industrial Design, in Chapter 3.

⁶⁴ RGALI., *ibid.*, 96-99

He cynically stated that he had been hearing about the synthesis of the arts since 1932, whenever there was discussion on the Palace of the Soviets, and had participated in five conferences since then, to no tangible outcome. Perhaps pushing his *samokritika* too far for the general tone of the conference, he declared that the battle for advancing realism and fighting formalism, already begun in 1935, had failed: “We don’t have realism [now]. I didn’t see any formalism then, this was a misunderstanding.”⁶⁵ For Paplin, such vicissitudes in the official Soviet rhetoric on art and a literature had generated glaring contradictions, such as the positive assessment of Mayakovsky as a “realist” in the 1950s, but his condemnation as a “formalist” in the 1930s. All this had led to the stagnation of Soviet artistic life: “sculpture stagnated eighteen years ago, and is still stagnant. Nothing has improved. I think we now have bureaucratic formalism.”⁶⁶ Paplin’s radical positions, voiced towards the end of the conference, didn’t seem to have attracted many followers and no trace of them appears in press reports on the conference.⁶⁷

The fact that an artist could publicly articulate such criticism in 1954, two years before the official beginning of the Thaw, demonstrates that Khrushchev’s speech didn’t initiate de-Stalinization *ex nihilo*, but instead unleashed the critical forces that had been percolating for years – perhaps already since the 1930s, if we accept Paplin’s position. The 1954 conference thus offers valuable insights into this period of transition. The trope of the synthesis of the arts allowed the development of a rich and varied discourse that, although nominally focused on art and architecture, in fact tackled many of the political issues arising from Stalin’s death. Eager to criticize the mistakes of the past and to lay down some foundations for future developments in Soviet aesthetics, the speakers were at the same time reluctant to propose a new style or set of concrete formal guidelines that would replace those that flourished under Stalin. Freely

⁶⁵ Ibid., 97.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 99.

⁶⁷ See, for example, the report in *Arkhitektura SSSR* (April 1954), 32.

employed to describe different styles and different historical periods, the synthesis of the arts allowed for a cautious yet determined search for a non-totalitarian art that would still serve the social functions assigned to Socialist Realism, a pursuit that might appear chimeric from today's point of view, but was seen as a tangible possibility during the period in question. Yet 1954 was still a very early stage in the process of fully formulating a new direction in Soviet art and architecture, something that would only be accomplished around 1958. In a poignant interjection during the third day of the conference, the artist Blinova refuted Polyakov's point that architecture communicates abstract ideas. "According to Marxism, there are no abstract ideas," she contended, offering yet another justification for the synthesis of the arts: painting, sculpture and the applied arts should keep architecture's abstract tendencies in check, help make its ideas concrete, and give them a tangible and intelligible form.⁶⁸ In some way, this is exactly what took place in the years following the 1954 conference: the abstract theoretical arguments for the synthesis of the arts were gradually translated into concrete forms, into new building projects that sought to combine art and architecture in ways that differed from the Stalinist paradigm – thus establishing a new, "Socialist Modernism" that was appropriate for a post-Stalinist Soviet Union.

A key step towards solidifying this new direction in Soviet architecture was another, less-known speech by Khrushchev, delivered later that year on December 7th 1954, at the All-Union Conference of Builders, Architects and Workers in the Building Materials Industry, in Construction Machinery and Road Machinery Industries, and in Design and Research Organizations.⁶⁹ Entitled "On Wide-Scale Introduction of Industrial Methods, Improving the

⁶⁸ RGALI., *ibid.*, 110-18. The idea that art gives concrete content to architecture can also be found in the statements of the architects of the Pioneers Palace, discussed above.

⁶⁹ Nikita Khrushchev, "On Wide-Scale Introduction of Industrial Methods, Improving the Quality and Reducing the Cost of Construction," in *Khrushchev Speaks*, 153-192.

Quality and Reducing the Cost of Construction,” the speech offered a forceful critique of the architects active under Stalinism, condemning them as frivolous and irresponsible, yet all the while refraining from any accusation of Stalin himself, who was still mentioned in positive terms. Mainly focusing on technical issues of construction, Khrushchev implicitly posed as the technocratic engineer who would replace Stalin, the “architect of Communism”—a rational, managerial alternative to the temperamental and irrational dictator-demiurge. The emergent Soviet leader had always been closer to engineering than to architecture: as minister-president of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, he had led a team of Soviet planners that were sent to Warsaw soon after the liberation, to assist in the reconstruction effort.⁷⁰ In his 1954 speech, he advocated standardized design and the widespread application of new materials and techniques, such as prefabrication and reinforced concrete. By discussing at length seemingly minute technical details – such as the correct placement of stairwells – Khrushchev clearly conveyed that buildings should primarily fulfill practical functions in an efficient and fiscally responsible way, whereas aesthetic considerations, if any, were delegated to a secondary role. A clear shift in terminology was taking place at the time: architecture (*arkhitektura*) was being displaced by construction (*stroitel'stvo*).⁷¹

Thus more than a year before his attack on Stalin (the “architect of communism”) and before any such move seemed possible, Khrushchev tested the waters by attacking the *actual* architects of Stalinism. He deemed them temperamental and irresponsible, putting their own idiosyncrasies ahead of the public good, in a manner that prefigured the accusations towards Stalin himself in the Secret Speech of 1956. The similarities with the criticisms voiced in the

⁷⁰ *Sześćcioletni plan odbudowy Warszawy: Szatę graficzną, wykresy, plany i perspektywy opracowano na podstawie materiałów i projektów Biura Urbanistycznego Warszawy* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1950), 24.

⁷¹ See the comment by Felix Novikov, *Soviet Modernism*, 17. This also reflects the new prominence of the contractor over the architect.

margins of the 1954 conference on synthesis, by Belisheva, Paplin and others is striking. In some ways, Khrushchev's manoeuvre of these years was to take such criticisms and put them center stage, turning grassroots criticism into a top-down official position.

To an audience full of architects, along with other professionals in construction, Khrushchev proclaimed:

Certain architects have been carried away with putting spires on buildings, with the result that such buildings resemble churches. Do you like the silhouette of a church? I do not wish to argue about tastes, but in apartment houses, such an appearance is not necessary. The modern apartment house must not be transformed by architectural design into a replica of a church or a museum.⁷²

The spires in question are none other than those topping the *vysocki*. Rather than emblems of a new, triumphal phase of Soviet culture, rising victorious from the Second World War, these Moscow high-rises were now recast as examples of waste and frivolity, of a decadence that Khrushchev condemned. To reinforce his point, he made a surprising reference to the history of Soviet architecture:

Some architects try to justify their incorrect stand on waste in designs by referring to the need to combat Constructivism. But they waste state funds under the guise of fighting Constructivism. What is Constructivism? Here is how the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, for instance, defines this tendency: "Constructivism... substitutes barren technical aspects born of the construction design for artistic design. Demanding functional 'logic' and 'rationalism' in construction, the Constructivists actually reached aesthetic admiration of form unrelated to content... The consequence of this is the antiartistic, dull 'box style' characteristic of modern bourgeois architecture. [...] Some architects, declaiming about the need to combat Constructivism, go to the opposite extreme – they decorate building façades excessively and often unnecessarily, thus wasting state funds. [...] Such architects should be called Constructivists in reverse, since they themselves are lapsing into 'aesthetic admiration of form divorced from content.'⁷³

This tenuous argument is typical of the reformist atmosphere that would characterize the upcoming Thaw: while it marked a clear change of direction, away from historicism and ornamentation and towards fiscally responsible functionalism, it also held fast to certain

⁷² *Khrushchev Speaks*, 169.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 171.

orthodoxies, such as the wholesale condemnation of Constructivism as “formalist” and the affirmation of architecture’s social function. While it paves the way for the unadorned glass boxes of modernism, it also still condemns them as “antiartistic” and bourgeois. In the process, the meaning of terms such as Constructivism and rationalism were utterly twisted, in a rhetorical balancing act typical of official Soviet discourse in periods of crisis and transition.

For Khrushchev, the architecture during Stalin’s reign was associated with “waste,” “excess,” “extravagance” and “distortion.” He castigated architects for spending more time learning about various historicist ornaments than about the economics of construction, oblivious to such concepts as cost per square meter, which he then proceeded to lecture on, citing wasteful examples of iconic Stalinist buildings.⁷⁴ An example from an unbuilt apartment building on Lyusinov street helped Khrushchev emphasize the absurdity of certain architects’ “artistic” ambitions: the top floor of the obligatory tower was designed with an octagonal plan, with windows on the corners, each corresponding to a pentagonal room inside. The architect Zakharov intended to install free-standing sculptures on the sills of these corner windows. “A pentagonal room with a window in the corner is awkward, not to mention the fact that the people in the room would have to look at the back of the sculpture for their entire life,” contended Khrushchev, acerbically concluding that “Comrade Zakharov [the building’s architect] was restrained from such ‘artistry’.”⁷⁵ Later in the speech, the politician-turned-architecture critic suggested that building facades should be beautiful due to their proportions and quality of construction, and not due to such frills.⁷⁶

It should be noted that, once again, such a change in the direction of Soviet architecture should not be solely attributed to Khrushchev. He himself pointed out that he drew heavily on

⁷⁴ Ibid., 168. Some of the examples are the Moscow high-rises on Krasniye Vorota and Smolenskaya.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 170.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 172.

the remarks put forth by architect Georgii Gradov earlier in the conference, which were highly critical of “formalistic distortions and stagnation” in architecture.⁷⁷ Khrushchev aimed to restore faith in the process of self-criticism, which under Stalinism had been a dangerous and potentially life-threatening undertaking. Praising Gradov’s suggestions for a *critical* examination of the classical heritage, Khrushchev lambasted Mordvinov, the president of the Soviet Academy of Architecture (who was present in the audience), for seeking to silence voices that challenged the status quo. The new leader’s call for a free exchange of opinions on creative issues, as well as the development of a critical attitude in art and architectural education was indeed a major step in de-Stalinization. By repeatedly casting Mordvinov as a kind of dictator within the architectural establishment that systematically hindered any attempts at criticism, Khrushchev implied that criticism was necessary and should be encouraged, not violently quashed as was the case under Stalin.

Khrushchev’s 1954 speech initiated a series of top-down reforms in Soviet architectural culture that culminated in November 4 1955, when a decree entitled “On the Elimination of Excesses in Design and Construction” (*Ob ustraneniі izlishestv v proektirovaniі i stroitel’stve*), was jointly issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (presided by Khrushchev) and the Soviet Council of Ministers (presided by Nikolai Bulganin).⁷⁸ The decree targeted the excesses (*izlishestva*) of Stalinist architecture, a word that is repeated throughout. It contained a long list of overly ornamented architecture, enumerating the specific architects who were found guilty of emphasizing the “showy” (*pokaznyi*) aspect of architecture. As in Khrushchev’s speech from 1954, the buildings of Stalinism are deemed “formalist” and

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ *Postanovlenie Tsentral’nogo Komiteta KPSS i Soveta Ministrov SSSR ot 4 noyabrya 1955 goda № 1871: “Ob ustraneniі izlishestv v proektirovaniі i stroitel’stve.”*

“divorced from life,” accusations that had been typically leveled against the avant-garde.⁷⁹ To address such proliferation of ornamental excess, the decree mandated a reform of architectural education, which would promote a *critical* engagement with classical heritage, and would also be open to advanced developments in Western architecture. To emphasize the need for standardized design, the decree also established an architectural competition for type houses, schools and hospitals to be completed for September 1st 1956, listing the desired specifications for each category, as well as the prizes to be awarded.⁸⁰

A sense of urgency can be discerned here. Soviet authorities were given three months to reexamine any ongoing projects and promptly remove any ornaments. In some cases, this resulted in buildings such as the one on Gorky street in Moscow: a portion of its facade was completed before the decree, and was thus fully ornamented, whereas the rest had to comply with the decree and was left unadorned [Fig. 1.22].⁸¹ A “Short course” on the history of Soviet Architecture that had been in the works for some years was on its way to the press when it was called back for major revisions following the decree, since it obviously could not correspond with the new direction in Soviet architecture.⁸² The urgent removal of “decorations” was even extended to the architects themselves: Boretskii and Polyakov were stripped of the Stalin prize that had been awarded to them a few years prior for the Leningradskaya Hotel, a prominent Moscow high-rise [Fig. 1.23]. A similar fate awaited Rybichkii, the architect of an overly

⁷⁹ “Formalism” is one of the many words of the Soviet official lexicon that changed meaning depending on the different political circumstances, yet remained undoubtedly negative for most of USSR’s history.

⁸⁰ For example, housing blocks should be limited to 5 floors, a seemingly arbitrary decision that became the norm for the next few years.

⁸¹ Currently Tverskaya.

⁸² Aleksandr Vlasov mentions the incident in his speech for the Second All-Union Conference of Soviet Architects in late 1955: *Soyuz Arkhitektorov SSSR, Vtoroi vsesoyuznyi s’ezd sovetskikh arkhitektorov, 26 noyabrya – 3 dekabrya 1955 g.: sokrashchenyi stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo literatury po stroitel’stvu i arkhitekture, 1956), 47. It is not a coincidence that Vlasov referred to the book as a “short course,” (*kratkii kurs*) which is exactly how Stalin’s most famous publication, *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, was colloquially known.

adorned apartment building in Moscow. In addition, many established architects were fired from their positions in state agencies. Ironically, many of those fired were at the time on an official tour of American architectural institutions, in an effort to familiarize themselves with advanced construction techniques that would allow them to move beyond historicist architecture. Thus divested of their official status, these architects were forced to interrupt their trip and return immediately to the USSR upon receiving news of the decree, an event that was reported in *Architectural Record* as a “purge.”⁸³ Although not harmed in any way, their firing was perceived by their American colleagues as a continuation of the Stalinist purging practices, whereas, from a Soviet perspective, the intention was precisely to undo the Stalinist heritage.

Even though Khrushchev’s 1954 speech and the 1955 decree were based on criticisms that were already circulating within professional circles (as seen in the conference on synthesis that preceded them), the Soviet architectural establishment was still caught by surprise, scrambling to comply. The situation was aptly described by Felix Novikov, a young architect who would soon become part of the team behind the Moscow Palace of the Pioneers:

What were we supposed to do? Wasn’t all of our previous creative service based on the party’s agenda and developed with its full support? And weren’t we generously rewarded for this service? [...] As for the professional goal of aesthetics, the following goal was set: ‘Architecture should have an appealing appearance.’ But what did that mean? Understand as you wish! Regardless of any specific interpretation, the war with ‘over-indulgence’ and ‘excess’ had begun. It was the start of the architectural ‘perestroika,’ as Khrushchev defined the process.⁸⁴

The final act of this “perestroika” took place less than a month after the November 4 decree, when the Second All-Union Congress of Soviet Architects was convened in Moscow (26 November - 3 December 1955).⁸⁵ Having received clear directives from the leadership, the

⁸³ “Purge Report Puts Grim End to Soviet Experts’ US Tour.” *Architectural Forum* 103, (1955): 16.

⁸⁴ Novikov, *Soviet Modernism*, 9-10.

⁸⁵ *Vtoroi vsesoyuznyi s’ezd sovetskikh arkhitektorov*. It is important to note that the first congress took place in 1937, the moment of Stalinization of Soviet Architecture. Thus Socialist-Realist architecture is

architects had to “self-reform” and swiftly espouse the new direction. All the speakers made a point of emphasizing technical themes and their speeches seemed more concerned with construction than with design and architectural composition. Even those older historicist architects such as Rudnev and Zholtovskii, who had been largely responsible for the ornamental excesses that had just been condemned, gave vague speeches, affirmative of the new directives and the technical approaches to building. The trope of collaboration, key to the 1954 conference on the synthesis of the arts, was similarly removed from the realm of artistic creation and focused instead on the collaboration of architects with engineers and technicians such as plumbers and electricians, with no mention of artists and craftspeople.⁸⁶

This utilitarian, anti-artistic focus of the new regime can be seen in the thousands of new apartment buildings, along with the accompanying schools, hospitals and other facilities that were constructed throughout the Soviet Union under Khrushchev’s leadership. They dominated the Soviet architectural press (such as the prominent journal *Arkhitektura SSSR*) and were emphatically devoid of ornamentation, or anything other than bare-bones structure and basic furnishings. More than any other building type, these *Khrushchoby* (a portmanteau combining Khrushchev and *trushchoby* – Russian for “slums”), came to define this period of Soviet architecture. They were arranged in *mikroraions* (microdistricts), another innovation of the time that replaced the *kvartaly* (the more classically inspired arrangements of Stalinist housing projects) with longer blocks surrounding green spaces, such as Moscow’s Novye Cheremushki housing estate from 1956.⁸⁷ The growing interest in Western architecture, which began around

neatly bracketed by two conferences, respectively following and preceding the Stalinization and de-Stalinization of Soviet politics.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 314.

⁸⁷ There is a growing scholarship on the *mikroraions* in Eastern Europe. For a discussion of their application in Romania, see Juliana Maxim, “Mass Housing and Collective Experience: on the Notion of Microraion in Romania in the 1950s and 1960s,” *The Journal of Architecture* 14, no. 1 (2009): 7-26.

1955 and peaked within the next few years, was similarly more focused on the technical accomplishments in mass housing rather than the works individual architects.⁸⁸

What was at stake behind the reforms described here was architecture's status as an art. The November decree was clear in criticizing the Academy of Architecture of the USSR for promoting a "one-sided, aesthetic understanding of architecture,"⁸⁹ which it sought to address by instituting a mechanistic conception of architecture that, freed from aesthetic concerns, would be transformed into "pure" construction. According to Novikov,

many powerful personalities immediately understood that Khrushchev's directive was the call for extracting architecture from the realm of art. In the opinion of these Soviet bureaucrats, art and excess had now become synonymous. Ordering architects to end superfluity often literally meant the end of art. And only by relying on the argument of ideological substance – always a powerful persuader – could the architect invite an artist to his or her team who would contribute to the aesthetic enrichment of the project, but, even then, only in cases when the need for such work was required by the architectural composition. In the final assessment, however, the absence of architecture cannot be compensated for by the presence of art.⁹⁰

Novikov's comment in fact summarizes how the attack on "excesses" changed the fate of the synthesis of the arts in the Soviet Union in the years following the reforms of 1954-55. As ornaments such as the ones on the Moscow State University were eliminated from facades, the underlying stripped-down constructions began to appear devoid of ideological content — and thus dangerously un-socialist. The search for a new, post-Stalinist synthesis that began in 1956 and led to the Palace of the Pioneers towards the end of the decade aimed precisely at filling this

⁸⁸ See, for example: E. Vol'fenzon, *Voprosy planirovki i zastroiki gorodov za rubezhom* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo literature po stroitel'stvu i architecture, 1957). The book focuses on mass housing developments in the UK, USA, France, Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries, as well as the "new towns" of France and the UK. Also, Pier Luigi Nervi's *Construire Corretamente* (1955) was translated into Russian in 1956, a telling choice given Nervi's emphasis on building technology. See Iurii Gerchuk, "The Aesthetics of Everyday Life in the Khrushchev Thaw in the USSR (1954-64)", in *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, ed. Susan E. Reid and David Crowley (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2000), 84

⁸⁹ "Ob ustraneniі izlishestv v proektirovanii i stroitel'stve."

⁹⁰ Novikov, *Soviet Modernism*, 16.

void left by the expulsion of ornament from Soviet architecture. The official means by which this was carried out, as well as its evident urgency, demonstrate that it was a political operation at its core: de-Stalinization thus proceeded from aesthetics to politics; ornamental excesses ought to be eliminated before the political excesses, such as the purges and the gulags, could be addressed. At a time when Stalin was dead but his politics were still in limbo, architectural excess became a convenient stand-in for political excess, and de-ornamentation became one of the first and most visible signs of de-Stalinization.

Ornament and Crime(s)

Shortly before the attack on architectural excesses was launched in December 1954, Soviet ornamentation reached its apex at the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition (VSKhV) in Moscow, which reopened on August 1st after many years of hiatus [Fig. 1.16].⁹¹ Occupying an area of more than two hundred hectares, the exhibition boasted a vast array of pavilions, dedicated to the Soviet republics as well as different sectors of agricultural production. The exhibition's architecture represents Stalinist eclecticism at its most extreme: classical columns, friezes and pediments are combined with gothic spires, Sumerian podiums, Timurid tiles and rococo garlands. Following Socialist Realism's stipulations for art that is "national in form and socialist in content," the pavilions of the different Soviet republics displayed a pastiche of local

⁹¹ The exhibition first opened on August 1st 1939, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the collectivization of Soviet agriculture. The Molotov-Ribbentrop nonaggression pact was signed a few weeks later, and the Second World War broke out on September 1st, with the invasion of Poland. The exhibition reopened in the summer of 1940 for a full five-month season, but in 1941 it was shut down prematurely after only a month of operation, due to the USSR's involvement in the war following the Nazi invasion. For more on the history of the exhibition, see Ol'ga Andreevna Zinov'eva, *Vos'moe Chudo Sveta: Vskhv-Vdnkh-Vvts*. (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2014). See also K. Andrea Rusnock, "The Art of Collectivization: The 1939 All-Union Agricultural Exhibition," in *Totalitarian Art and Modernity*, ed. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jacob Wamberg (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2010): 198-216.

traditional elements: the Uzbekistan pavilion (1939; renovated 1954) [Fig. 1.24-1.25] was covered in Islamic latticework in ceramic and metal, while the arches and reliefs of the pavilion of Georgia drew from the country's medieval Christian tradition [Fig. 1.26]. Arguably, even contemporary Soviet architecture was subjected to quotation: the main pavilion by the entrance, designed by a team led by Yurii Shchuko, took the form of a Moscow high-rise in miniature, with stepped levels adorned with colonnades and topped by a gilded spire [Fig. 1.27].

According to some accounts, more than two thousand artists produced the countless reliefs, freestanding sculptures, mosaics, frescoes and stained glass, which covered every possible surface.⁹² While drawing on classical architecture and other historical sources, the ornaments were adapted to glorify Soviet collectivized agriculture, and thus acquired updated, “revolutionary” forms, such as the capitals covered in sheaves of wheat instead of more classical floral ornaments, like acanthus leaves [Fig. 1.28]. Often such adaptations produced playful, if not somewhat absurd, results: in the rabbit-breeding pavilion, the austere neoclassical portico is topped by an ionic frieze depicting rabbits hopping around, while gilded statues of figures holding rabbits stood in elaborate niches [Fig. 1.29]. Such works were produced by a younger generation of lesser known architects and artists that had matured under Stalinist eclecticism, yet had no attachment to proper academic traditions, such as that represented by Zholtovskii. This led to some completely *sui generis* forms, such as the lampposts in the form of wheat stalks that, arranged along straight alleys, created a fantastical landscape of an illuminated wheat field [Fig. 1.30].

Such images of hypertrophic plants, of nature that had exceeded natural scale, abounded in VSKhV: the centerpieces of the two main fountains consisted of gigantic bundles of wheat,

⁹² Catherine Cooke, “Beauty as a Route to ‘the Radiant Future’: Responses of Soviet Architecture,” *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Design, Stalin and the Thaw (1997): 145.

sunflowers and other crops rendered in glistening gold mosaic [Fig. 1.31]. The All-Union Agricultural exhibition thus did not merely represent Soviet agriculture; it aimed at its metaphysical generation. At a time when food shortages were still recurring, the exhibition visually produced a cornucopia of agricultural goods that was unattainable in reality. The pavilion of Siberia is the most extreme case in point: it is topped with baskets overflowing with grapes, a crop that is impossible to produce in this arctic region [Fig. 1.32]. Under Stalinism, Trofim D. Lysenko's theories of environmentally acquired inheritance dominated Soviet science.⁹³ Defying Mendelian genetics, Lysenko claimed that species could acquire new, inheritable characteristics, such as resistance to extreme weather conditions, through the sheer labor that was invested in them. Thus by toiling to grow grapes in ever-colder climates, the creation of a species that could "naturally" grow in Siberia was seen as an attainable goal.

Yet Siberia under Stalin was better known for its forced labor camps administered by GULAG (*Glavnoe upravlenie lagerei*, Main Camp Administration) than its fertile vineyards. The ornaments of the pavilion, themselves products of excessive, anonymous artistic labor, correspond to the aspirational products of forced labor in the arctic. The pavilion of Siberia thus encapsulates this equivalence between architectural and political excess that motivated the reforms of 1954-56, as described above. Khrushchev began the de-Stalinization of aesthetics by banishing ornament in 1954; he then initiated the de-Stalinization of politics by talking openly about the camps, and releasing political prisoners in 1956.⁹⁴ At the time, both Stalinist ornament and Stalinist crimes were seen as indications of criminal irresponsibility, on behalf of both the architects and the political *nomenklatura*. They were products of personal whimsies that had remained unchecked, because collective processes of criticism and decision-making had been

⁹³ David Joravsky, *The Lysenko Affair* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970).

⁹⁴ It should be noted that the camp system was not completely abolished under Khrushchev, despite the vast changes that took place around 1956.

suppressed, either by dictatorial architects or by the political culture established by Stalin himself.

This equivalence between ornament and crime recalls some of the anti-ornamental impulses in the architectural discourse of the first decade of the twentieth century, most prominently expressed by Adolf Loos's famous polemic from 1908, *Ornament and Crime*.⁹⁵ Although no reference is made to Loos at the time and the direct influence of his thought on the Soviet architectural culture of the 1950s can be hardly ascertained, there are striking similarities between these two discussions of ornament.⁹⁶ In both cases, the ornamental impulse is seen as a disease that needs to be contained, a relic from a previous phase of history that has been otherwise superseded.⁹⁷ More crucially, in both cases ornament is seen as wasteful, and therefore harmful for society. Loos describes it as "a crime against the national economy that should result in a waste of human labor, money, and material."⁹⁸ Such a damning statement is not far from that contained in Khrushchev's 1954 speech or the 1955 decree, which similarly equated ornamentation with social harm. In both instances the condemnation of ornament became a foundation for a new aesthetic (the early Modernism of the 1920s or the rebooted Soviet Modernism of the late 1950s and 1960s), aiming to mark a clear break with a discredited past, whose sociopolitical pathology had directly generated ornamental excess. In both cases,

⁹⁵ Adolf Loos, "Ornament und Verbrechen," in *Trotzdem 1900-1930*, ed. Adolf Opel (Wien: Georg Prager Verlag, 1982): 78-88. For an English translation, see Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime," in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, ed. Ulrich Konrads, trans. Michael Bullock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1970): 19-24.

⁹⁶ Loos' "Ornament and Crime" was first translated into Russian by V.G. Kalish, in the anthology *Mastera arkhitektury ob arkhitekture: Zarubezhnaya arkhitektura, konets XIX-XX vek*, ed. A.V. Ikonnikov (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1972): 143-48. Otherwise, an obituary by I. Kan was published in January 1931 in the Russian émigré journal *Tsentral'naya Evropa* (Prague: Orbis), vol. 4 issue 1, 37-39.

⁹⁷ Loos actually uses the term "ornament disease," which he thinks is being systematically promoted by the Hapsburg State: Loos, "Ornament and Crime" in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, 20. A similar view of ornament as a contagion can be seen in Khrushchev's 1954 speech and the 1955 decree, whereby the official architectural institutions of the USSR serve as hosts for its spread.

⁹⁸ Loos, *ibid.*, 21.

ornament is seen as a deviation that ought to be corrected through critical intervention, articulated in the form of widely circulated texts written in a populist, scathing tone.

Yet the nature of the deviation is starkly different between Loos's case and the Soviet 1950s. For the Austrian, ornamentation is an almost biological condition that is associated with immaturity (such as in children's doodles) and a broadly defined "degeneracy," relating to either advanced age (the embroideries of an "old lady") or – in accordance with the racist theories of the time – with "primitive" cultures. In contrast, according to the Soviet view ornament was not rooted in such inescapable biological factors, but in history and politics. Thus the excesses of the Stalinist buildings were not simply attributed to their architects' innate flaws, but to the disrespect of the central Marxist-Leninist principle of collectivism, which allowed such flaws to grow uncontrolled. Similarly, the egregious crimes committed under Stalin were not due to the dictator's own unhinged personality, but to the "cult" of such a personality that defied the principles of collective leadership, as Khrushchev stated in his Secret Speech.

Thus, the difference between the two articulations of ornament and crime lie in the nature of the crime, as well as the precise causal relation between the two. For Loos, crime is a vague and general category, a term exaggerated for rhetorical effect in order to make an overarching moral point: ornament is amoral, associated with criminals (as well as women and children), but not exclusively practiced by them. For the Soviets, on the other hand, the crimes were historically defined and denounced individually, as evidenced by the long lists of specific architects and buildings that are condemned in the documents discussed here, which read like an indictment issued by a tribunal.

In the greater cultural project of de-Stalinization, these crimes of ornamentation were stand-ins for the greater crimes of Stalinism, which before the Secret Speech of 1956 were not

mentioned by name. The endless friezes, cornices and capitals in stone and ceramic stood in for the purges and the gulags – more tangible, delimited and concrete, and thus more conveniently criticized before tackling Stalinism itself. Both Soviet ornament and crimes were caused by *excess*, a term that was central to the criticisms articulated during the Thaw. During de-Stalinization, “excess” was also used by those Communists who were not wishing to throw the baby of Soviet state socialism out with the bathwater of Stalinism, a position that was common in many Western Communist parties. The implication was that Stalin’s motivations were good, since his aim was to consolidate and protect the Soviet system, but he had been overzealous in doing so – an interpretation that absolved him of some moral responsibility. At the same time, excess was also an economic consideration: a waste of material and labor on superfluties that lay outside the utilitarian scope of architecture.

Under Khrushchev, ornaments were seen as external appendages to architecture that could be easily stripped by enacting a decree, without necessarily altering the essence of Soviet architecture. Such a conception of ornament as a separate entity from the work itself, so widespread in modernism, is Kantian in its origin. In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant states:

Even what we call ornament (*parerga*), i.e. what does not belong to the whole presentation of the object as an intrinsic constituent, but is only an extrinsic addition, does indeed increase our taste’s liking, yet it too does so only by its form, as in the case of picture frames, or drapery on statues, or colonnades around magnificent buildings. But if the ornament does not itself consist in beautiful form, and if it is used as a golden frame is used, merely to recommend the painting by its charm, it is then called finery and harms genuine beauty.⁹⁹

This passage later inspired Jacques Derrida’s seminal essay on the Parergon, in which he criticized Kant’s definition of the ornament / parergon as essentially external to the *ergon*, the

⁹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), §14, p. 72. Kant uses the term *Zieraten*, which he distinguishes from *Schmuck*.

work of art.¹⁰⁰ For Derrida, the *parergon* appears quasi-detachable, yet it is not. It is linked to an inherent lack inside the work, which it supplements.¹⁰¹ This supplementary relation holds the inside and the outside of the work (the *oeuvre* and the *parergon* as *hors-d'oeuvre*) in tension, and either term of this relationship requires the other in order to exist. For Derrida, “all analytics of aesthetic judgments permanently presumes that one can distinguish between the intrinsic and the extrinsic.”¹⁰² Yet the function of the ornament-*parergon* is precisely this: it destabilizes the work it supplements, it challenges the boundaries between the intrinsic and the extrinsic. The ornament is thus dangerous (“that dangerous supplement,” as the second chapter of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* is entitled), it menaces the work that it supplements. Therefore, the elimination of ornament is often seen as liberation: when the unadorned glass box of the Soviet Pavilion appeared in the Brussels World Fair of 1958 [Fig. 1.33], *Pravda* proudly announced: “The glass prism of the Soviet pavilion has definitively broken with the tradition of the ornament.”¹⁰³

Still, this freedom from ornament can never be complete. As Derrida warns, the *parergon* cannot be detached from the *ergon* without radically altering it (there is no “pure severing,” or *coupure pure*).¹⁰⁴ Accordingly, the sudden removal of ornaments and other “superfluities” (*izlishestva*) from buildings throughout the Soviet Union following the 1955 decree laid bare an inner lack in architecture’s ability to signify, which ornaments supplemented in the first place.

With the advent of Socialist Realism in 1934, the general aesthetic principles of the dogma,

¹⁰⁰ Jacques Derrida, *La vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010). Kant’s definition is cited in p. 60. Derrida traced the use of the word *parergon* (from Greek *para* + *ergon*, “beside the work”), which Kant equated with ornament, to ancient Greek philosophical texts, where it meant an aside or a footnote, and therefore unfit for the discussion of important issues. In that sense, the *parergon* had assumed a negative connotation, something that philosophy ought to work *against*.

¹⁰¹ Derrida, 69.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁰³ Cited in Iurii Gerchuk, “The Aesthetics of Everyday Life in the Khrushchev Thaw in the USSR (1954-64),” 83. For more on the Soviet pavilion in Brussels, see Chapter Four.

¹⁰⁴ Derrida, 73.

despite generally deriving from literature, had to be translated into all the other arts. As a result, architecture also ought to be “socialist in form, national in content,” and obey very specific requirements, often codified in the four terms *realnost’* (realism), *narodnost’* (emphasis on national / ethnic culture), *typichnost’* (avoidance of personal / subjective themes in favor of “typical” ones) and *partiinnost’* (adherence to the party line, but also the essential Leninist principle of “taking sides” on all political issues, thus avoiding political neutrality). Rather than just fulfill its assigned utilitarian functions, a Socialist-Realist building should therefore also signify and communicate a clearly legible revolutionary message. In other words, architecture should speak, it should be an *architecture parlante*, to use a term from another revolutionary context, that of late-eighteenth-century France and the work of architects such as Claude-Nicolas Ledoux.¹⁰⁵

While everything external to architecture’s core utilitarian functions was condemned during the years 1954-55, the crucial issue, the principles of Socialist Realism and the imperative for architecture to “speak” remained firmly in place. Deprived of ornaments, and therefore of all their habitual means of signification, Soviet architects were confronted with an impasse: they were expected to reject the Stalinist paradigm of profuse ornamentation, all the while preserving its signifying functions. Without the aid of external “superfluities,” buildings could no longer communicate a revolutionary message, they were no longer Socialist. Thus if the architectural reforms were to be strictly applied, the results would be indistinguishable from the Western modernist buildings that were still condemned as “formalist” and “bourgeois.” Khrushchev’s 1954 speech already contained traces of this anxiety: while essentially advocating stripped-down,

¹⁰⁵ The term is commonly used to describe architecture that communicates its function through its form, as seen in Ledoux’s plans for Arc-et-Senans. According to Emil Kaufman, the term originates in an anonymous essay entitled “Etudes d’architecture en France,” published in 1852 in the *Magasin Pittoresque*, where it was used to describe Ledoux’s work. See Emil Kaufmann, *Baroque and Post-Baroque in England, Italy, and France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), 251, n. 78.

standardized buildings, he also rushed to declare that Constructivism and its Western modernist successors produced “boxes” that were “dull and antiartistic.”¹⁰⁶

This comment implied a lingering desire for buildings to have aesthetic value, despite ridiculing architects’ own efforts at “artistry.” The ever-changing and inclusive discourse on synthesis, as well as the multivalent notion of “monumental-decorative” art, offered a resolution to such contradictions. Although initially used to describe the ornaments of Stalinism, these terms were increasingly associated with individual, large works such as frescos, reliefs and mosaics, attached to prominent parts of buildings without entirely covering them, as in the Palace of the Pioneers analyzed above. Gradually, the balance between the monumental and the decorative shifted, and individual *works* of painting and sculpture, not repetitive ornaments, were to provide architecture with ideological content. This transition from ornament to work can already be detected in Loos, who placed the two on the opposite ends of an evolutionary spectrum. In his model, the work of art is the *telos* of ornament: artistic creation begins as ornamentation (in both childhood and the earlier stages of civilization) and evolves into art proper as civilization develops. Using Loos as a starting point, Alina Payne recently proposed a genealogy of architectural modernism by examining the historiography of ornament during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁰⁷ Payne traces the establishment of ornament as an object of art-historical inquiry in parallel to its elimination from architecture and its transformation to mobile, mass-produced objects, and posits both processes as foundational for the development of modernism in the early twentieth century.

¹⁰⁶ *Khrushchev Speaks*, 171.

¹⁰⁷ Alina Payne, *From Ornament to Object: Genealogies of Architectural Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). See also its review by Spyros Papapetros, “Ornament and object – ornament as object,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 7 (December 2012), <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/papapetros-review.pdf> (accessed November 20, 2014).

A highly accelerated version of this process took place in the Soviet Union from 1956 to 1958. The establishment of Soviet postwar modernism in the wake of Socialist Realism similarly followed an intense theoretical engagement with ornament, ranging from the polemics discussed above to the renewed interest in folk ornaments from the various republics of the USSR.¹⁰⁸ Despite the growth of Soviet interior and industrial design towards the end of the 1950s, the move away from ornament led to a different direction in the Soviet Union than the one sketched out by Payne; wishing to eschew the mobile object-commodity and its associations with the free market, artists, architects and critics turned to monumental works, which took up the mediatory role between bodies and buildings that ornament had previously fulfilled.¹⁰⁹ This new paradigm of a post-Stalinist synthesis that would “break with the tradition of ornament” was elaborated through two major architectural competitions, for the Soviet pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World Fair (held in 1956), as well as the two final stages of the Palace of the Soviets competition (held in 1957 and 1959 and eventually never realized). With the new aesthetic dictates firmly in place, architects turned to their drawing boards in order to envision what the new, post-Stalinist architecture would look like.

¹⁰⁸ Publications on “national” ornaments of the various Soviet republics became increasingly common in the 1950s, with examples such as K. I. Raulava, *Belaruski narodny ornament* (Minsk: 1953); T. K. Basenov, *Ornament Kazakhstana v arkhitekture* (Alma-Ata: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk Kazakhskoi SSR, 1957); Khikmat A. Yuldashev, *Arkhitekturnyi ornament Tadzhikistana* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi izdatel'stvo literatury po stroitel'stvu i arkhitekture, 1957). The frequency of such publications intensifies during the 1960s. Many articles on similar topics appeared regularly in the journal *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo* since its establishment in 1957.

¹⁰⁹ For Payne, this mediation is one of the main functions of architectural ornament. See also my discussion of the opening ceremony of the Warsaw Palace of Culture in the following chapter.

1956-58: Toward a Soviet Modernism

The Brussels World Fair of 1958, the first of the postwar era, coincided with this pivotal moment in Soviet architecture.¹¹⁰ The competition for the pavilion in 1956 was in fact the most important architectural event to follow the series of reforms that unfolded in 1954-55. It provided the authorities with an opportunity to showcase to the world its new, post-Stalinist architecture, which would symbolize the recent turn away from Stalinism and towards a “communism with a human face.” The various architectural teams that submitted designs had to follow imperatives for light and efficient construction, which were not only imposed by the 1955 decree, but were also stipulated by the Belgian organizers, who wished for the exhibition grounds to be cleared of pavilions and converted back into a park shortly after the Expo had concluded.¹¹¹ At the same time, Iofan’s 1937 pavilion in Paris was already celebrated as the most iconic example of Soviet architecture, as well as a successful realization of the synthesis of the arts. The 1956 competition projects appear haunted by the 1937 pavilion: many elements of its composition often reappear, although they are sufficiently “reformed” to respond to the new imperatives of the post-Stalin era.

The project by the team led by Yurii Arndt [Fig. 1.34] consisted of a semi-transparent glass rotunda with an oculus on the roof – ironically very similar to Edward Durrell Stone’s realized US pavilion for the Brussels Expo [Fig. 4.17].¹¹² Mukhina’s *Rabochii i Kolhoznitsa* was transformed into a stylized two-dimensional logo and was suspended above the entrance, thus

¹¹⁰ The same is true for Poland and Yugoslavia, whose pavilions will be compared to the Soviet one in Chapter Four.

¹¹¹ Rika Devos, Mil De Kooning and Geert Bekaert, *L’architecture moderne à l’Expo 58: “Pour un monde plus humain”* (Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 2006).

¹¹² The competition drawings are in the collection of the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture in Moscow. A selection of this material has been published in Anna Petrova, Nelli Podgorskaya, and Ekaterina Usova, *Pavil’ony SSSR na mezhdunarodnykh vystavkakh* (Moscow: Podgorskaya, 2013): 165-89.

breaking with the style, scale and placement of the 1937 sculpture, but preserving its symbolic resonance. Another element from the 1937 pavilion, the figurative friezes that flanked the entrance, made their reappearance in the most unlikely of places: a continuous frieze, presumably in metal or stucco, tops Arndt's translucent structure, and allows for the deployment of an ideologically charged narrative on an otherwise abstract architectural form.

Similar references to the Soviet pavilions of the 1930s can be seen in Viktor Andreev's project [Fig. 1.35], where the lateral friezes of the 1937 pavilion and the single colossal statue on a pillar from the 1939 Soviet pavilion in New York (also by Iofan) are combined with a prismatic box that is typical of the more classicist tendencies of the International Style, with a rhythmical repetition of vertical supports. Dmitrii Burdin's design [Fig. 1.36-1.37] follows a similar compositional strategy: a free-standing sculpture on a pillar stands before a glass prism with two large reliefs flanking the entrance.¹¹³ In the drawings that survive, the combination of modern construction and classical art appears as a clash: the sculptures, seemingly in white stone or stucco are in sharp contrast with the translucent curtain walls of the building.

In Viktor Lebedev's submission [Fig. 1.38], classical friezes are juxtaposed with one of the archetypal forms of modern architecture, the railway shed — in what is perhaps a reference to the earlier history of exhibition architecture, Ferdinand Dutert's *Galerie des machines* from the Paris *Exposition Universelle* of 1889. In some versions, the friezes curve around the corners in the manner of Art Deco streamlining from the late 1920s and 1930s — another important moment in the history of exhibition architecture. Despite adhering to the new directives about modern construction technologies and the elimination of frills, Lebedev's design preserves some of the eclecticism seen in the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition (VSKhV) from two years prior. Yet,

¹¹³ One relief depicts Soviet agriculture, the other one industry, a typical pairing in Soviet iconography, from the very constituent parts of the hammer and sickle to Mukhina's *Rabochii i Kolkhoznitsa*.

instead of the undisciplined combination of different historical and traditional forms seen in VSKhV, the quotations in Lebedev's pavilion appear to be more historically motivated: the frieze preserves classical proportions, thus correcting the distortions that the classical heritage underwent under Stalinism; the vaulted glass shed points to a moment of technological optimism, which was also being experienced in the USSR at the moment, with the imminent launch of the first Sputnik; finally, the Art Deco detailing refers to the golden era of Soviet exhibition architecture. As mentioned above, this spirit of retrospection is typical of Khrushchev's Thaw, when different moments in history before Stalin's reign were used as reference points in the process of reforming Soviet politics.

Such projects oscillate between two different worlds, one of translucent prisms of glass and steel and one of stone sculptures, reliefs and monumental podiums. At this time of transition, they served as explorations on paper, testing the limits between innovation and adherence to tradition. It is significant that certain established architects of Socialist Realism produced some of the most openly modernist proposals. Aleksandr Khryakov, who had won a Stalin prize for his participation in Lev Rudnev's team for the Moscow State University, designed a pavilion that, although not devoid of classical sculptural elements, relied on a thoroughly modern architectural language [Fig. 1.39]. A horizontal building with ribbon windows was topped by a tower covered in a simple glass curtain wall, thus combining the two most elemental forms of the International Style. An alumnus of VKhUTEMAS / VKhUTEIN in the 1920s, Khryakov seems to come full-circle after the long Socialist-Realist interlude. Perhaps due to his status as a Stalin Prize winner, he appears less hesitant than his colleagues in firmly embracing the new direction in Soviet architecture.

Yet the winner of the competition was a young architect with little previous experience, Anatolii Poyanskii. His project [Fig. 1.40, 1.33], essentially a glass box with few distinguishing features other than the monumental portico, fully espoused the pragmatic and economical construction that was mandated by the recent reforms. While his colleagues still struggled with aesthetic concerns and with the heritage of the 1930s pavilions, Polyanskii turned firmly towards an unabashed functionalism, completely rejecting the grand tradition established by Boris Iofan.¹¹⁴ The latter, already discredited for “lack of inspiration” since 1948 and his Moscow State University design, seems to have attempted to participate in the competition: a few preliminary sketches for a portal, signed by Iofan, survive in the collection of the Shchusev Museum in Moscow. They depict a pointed arch flanked by stacked figurative sculptures in a quasi-Gothic arrangement, with no other indication for the rest of the building. The legendary architect that had shaped Stalinist architecture by offering sculpture a dominant position was now on the wrong side of history: other than these few sketches on rice paper, no traces of his pavilion exist today.

After “reforming” the Soviet exhibition pavilion, another iconic building from the Stalinist 1930s – also by Boris Iofan – had to be confronted: The Palace of the Soviets. Starting in 1931, the numerous competitions for this building had marked the Stalinization of Soviet architecture, as modernist projects were gradually ostracized in favor of Iofan’s (and eventually also Gel’freikh’s and Shchuko’s) ornate tower topped with Lenin’s statue [Fig. 1.21].¹¹⁵ It was only fitting that Stalinist architecture ended how it began: with a long series of paper projects for the ever-unrealized Palace. By Stalin’s death in 1953, limited work on the foundations was

¹¹⁴ The realized version of the project will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

¹¹⁵ Nikolai Atarov, *Dvoretz Sovetov* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1940); Peter Lizon, *The Palace of the Soviets: The Paradigm of Architecture in the USSR* (Colorado Springs, CO: Three Continents Press, 1992); See also Chapter Seven of Jean-Louis Cohen, *Le Corbusier and the mystique of the USSR: theories and projects for Moscow, 1928-1936* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

underway at the site of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior near the Kremlin, which was demolished in 1931 for this purpose. In 1956, Khrushchev referred to the project in his Secret Speech, lamenting the delays in the construction and interpreting them as a lack of respect for Lenin's memory – who had initially conceived the project and whom the Palace was supposed to memorialize.¹¹⁶ Already in September 1956, a new, open competition was announced, to be held in early 1957.¹¹⁷ This was shortly followed by a closed competition in the same year, when established architects such as Zholtovskii and Alabyan were invited. Finally, a second closed competition followed in 1959, and materials from both rounds were published in a volume in 1961, when it had become increasingly apparent that the grandiose project would never reach fruition, and the focus shifted to the Kremlin Palace of Congresses, as discussed below.¹¹⁸

In the introduction to the publication, the authors frame the competition within the recent changes in Soviet architecture, stating that the reform (*perestroika*) of architecture was not yet complete, observing the persistence of conservative tendencies.¹¹⁹ The publication of the competition projects, accompanied with critical analyses, aimed at presenting the status quo of Soviet architecture at the end of the 1950s, and at actively influencing its further development, by participating in what the authors termed as the “ongoing battle between innovative and conservative directions.”¹²⁰ At first, Iofan's project from the 1930s ought to be criticized: it was described as a “grandiose podium” that would be impossible to operate and whose “pharaonic” proportions were foreign to the ideology of the Soviet man, and was discredited as a “one-sided,

¹¹⁶ *Khrushchev Speaks*, 256.

¹¹⁷ *Arkhitetkura SSSR* 9 (September 1956): 1.

¹¹⁸ Kirillova, L. I., G. B. Minervin and G. A. Shemiakin, eds. *Dvorets Sovetov: Materialy konkursa 1957-1959 gg.* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi izdatel'stvo literatury po stroitel'stvu, arkhitekture i stroitel'noi tekhnike, 1961).

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

aesthetic understanding of architecture.”¹²¹ To amend this, the two distinct functions that were combined in Iofan’s project, the Palace of the Soviets and the memorial to Lenin, were now separated: the brief for the 1957 competition mentions that a separate Lenin Memorial would be created, thus programmatically dissociating the two components of the 1930s project, and with them the Stalinist mode of synthesis between art and architecture.

Another perceived flaw of the 1930s project was its proximity to Moscow’s historic core, which would dwarf the monuments of the Kremlin. For the 1957 competition, a new site was proposed at the southwest part of the city, the main area of postwar expansion, where large housing projects, such the Novye Chermushki, were already under construction. Yet this was also the location of the largest of Stalin’s towers, the Moscow State University, which the new Palace of the Soviets had to symbolically confront. The relationship between the two buildings thus became a key determining factor for the competition – for both the design of the projects and their subsequent critical assessment.¹²² In the extended analysis of the competition published in the 1961 volume, the authors emphasize the need to contrast the MSU, by confronting its discredited model of monumentality with new means. They praised the most stripped-down modernist projects, such as the one by the “*k solntsu*” team (“towards the sun” – architects V. P. Davidenko, A. D. Meyerson) as “laconic” and therefore opposed to the verbose facade of the MSU and all its ornamental superfluities [Fig. 1.41].

The elaboration of such vivid terms for architectural criticism is arguably one of the main outcomes of the 1957-59 competitions. In the 1961 publication, Stalinist architecture is described as formalist, conservative, pseudo-monumental, archaic, “restorative” (*restavratskii*), and, above all, “eclectic.” The last became the main derogatory term, since it conveyed a certain

¹²¹ Ibid., 11.

¹²² Ibid., 18-19.

subjectivist whimsy that was antithetical to the collectivist spirit of socialism. The term “historicist,” on the other hand, was not as widely employed, and when it did it was devoid of such negative connotations. In addition, Socialist Realist forms were deemed “closed” and “centrist,” words that could also describe Stalinism in general.¹²³ On the other hand, the authors warned against the overly enthusiastic adoption of modernism (which was not called by its name), and chastised the “fetishization of the achievements of construction technology” and “glass mania” (*steklomania*), which they discerned in projects such as the one by the “Epokha” team [Fig. 1.42].¹²⁴ The fear of a rushed acceptance of modern architecture is clearly articulated in the conclusion of one of the essays, where the authors discern the danger of pseudo-innovation (*psedonovatrostvo*), which they define as the “uncritical treatment of the theory and practice of contemporary capitalist architecture.”¹²⁵ In other words, in its enthusiastic leap forward, Soviet architecture ran the risk of not being Soviet any more. The authors thus actively sought to form a critical discourse that would support the new direction in Soviet architecture, and perhaps reclaim such discourse from politicians such as Khrushchev who had a very limited understanding of architecture. It is important to note that among these authors were such young luminaries as Selim Khan-Magomedov, who gained notoriety in the USSR and abroad from the 1970s onwards for his pioneering work on the history of Soviet avant-garde architecture.¹²⁶

The synthesis of the arts is another term that featured prominently in essays on the competition, where a distinction between different types of synthesis is developed. Stating that synthesis is not just simple “embellishment” (*ukrashenie*) of a building with sculpture, an

¹²³ It is significant that the binary open/closed appears in the USSR at about the same time that Oskar Hansen in Poland codifies it in his theory of the “Open Form.” See the following chapter.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹²⁶ Selim O. Khan-Magomedov and Catherine Cooke, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and 1930s* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987).

“innovative” (*novatorskii*) type of synthesis is discerned in projects such the one by L. N. Pavlov, where large, stylized murals cover the external walls of a peristyle [Fig. 1.43]. The authors seem to favor two-dimensional murals in fresco and mosaic over reliefs and free-standing sculptures, which were the staples of Stalinist synthesis. In this context, even three-dimensional elements such as the slanted obelisk in front of M. Barshch’s project are converted into supports for flat, stylized mosaics [Fig. 1.44]. On the other hand, such innovative synthesis is contrasted with more traditional articulations of classical reliefs and sculptures, which are now deemed as having little organic relationship to the buildings they complement.

The project singled out in this respect was the one by Aleksandr Vlasov, which also seems to have garnered most positive comments – and is arguably the only project from the competition that is somewhat known today [Fig. 1.45-1.48].¹²⁷ Consisting of three oval auditoria encased in a single glass box, the project’s emphatic horizontality is in direct confrontation with the stepped spire of the MSU behind it.¹²⁸ Reversing the Stalinist formula of encrusting a building’s exterior with art, in Vlasov’s Palace of the Soviets all the synthesis occurs in the interior, in the space between the auditoria under the glass roof, which was envisioned as a freely accessible public space. The curved external walls of the auditoria in this public space were covered in colorful murals, which appear in some renditions to be mosaics with a golden background. According to the authors, the synthesis of the arts contributes to the “concretization” (*konkretizatsiya*) of architecture and potentially contributes to the building’s

¹²⁷ It was reproduced in Anders Åman, *Architecture and Ideology in Eastern Europe During the Stalin Era: An Aspect of Cold War History* (New York; Cambridge, Mass.: Architectural History Foundation; MIT Press, 1992), one of the earliest Western studies of the subject. A color perspective drawing of Vlasov’s project is also reproduced in David Crowley and Jane Pavitt, eds. *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2008), 135.

¹²⁸ The Russian architectural historian Andrei Ikonnikov has rightly pointed out the similarity between Vlasov’s composition and Edward Durrell-Stone’s 1965 design for the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. Andrei V. Ikonnikov, *Russian Architecture of the Soviet Period* (Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1988): 274-5.

function, by helping orientate the visitor.¹²⁹ In praising the project's use of visual arts, the authors of the monograph on the competition made a reference to that originary moment of Soviet synthesis, Lenin's 1918 plan for monumental propaganda.

In the second round of the competition, more architects turned to this "innovative" type of synthesis, as murals and other works became essential components of the new projects. According to the critical essays published in the monograph, the architects' attitudes towards synthesis had changed between 1957 and 1959, as more and more relied on it for their new projects.¹³⁰ The argument was that the synthesis of the arts was the answer to the problem of a new monumentality that would befit an age of technological progress, when the old solutions such as heavy stone reliefs were no longer viable: the solutions of the past, such as the Moscow metro, the *vysocki* and the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition had to be replaced by "more expressive and more effective ways of combining architecture and the visual arts."¹³¹ There are perhaps some parallels to the West here: already in 1943, Josep Lluís Sert, Fernand Léger and Sigfried Giedion published "Nine Points on Monumentality," where they dealt with the problem of a new monumentality that would befit the modern era.¹³² The key difference is that for them, monumentality had been devalued in their time, and they sought ways to reinvigorate it. Conversely, the issue in the Soviet Union in the wake of Stalinism was the overabundance of monumentality: the aim was to temper it, while preserving some of its functions. What was also at stake was the very status of the visual arts within the architectural context; the rhythmical repetition of reliefs and statues in such buildings "does not constitute synthesis of the arts," the

¹²⁹ *Doverets Sovetov*, 33. This forced argument seems to pander to the functionalist obsessions of the Khrushchev era.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 115 and 118.

¹³² Josep Lluís Sert, Fernand Léger and Sigfried Giedion, "Nine Points on Monumentality," reprinted in *Architecture Culture, 1943-1968: A Documentary Anthology*, ed. Joan Ockman (New York: Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, 1993): 27-30.

authors contended, but “the transformation of sculpture into elements of architectural decor.”¹³³ Rather than a simple abolition of “frills,” as Khrushchev had demanded, these critics discerned the subsumption of art under the all-encompassing ornament of Stalinism, and advocated for the reversal of this process.

As a result of this turn towards synthesis, Vlasov’s project gained even more critical attention.¹³⁴ Vlasov himself took the idea of synthesis of art and architecture further by adding a third term, nature. In the final version of the project, trees were added between the murals under the glass roof, thus converting the interior into a garden and further affirming its public status [Fig. 1.49-1.50]. In his personal statement, the architect claimed that this was return to communist ideas of city planning, that envisioned future cities as garden-cities.¹³⁵ At the same time, he specified the medium of the murals that had been vaguely sketched out in the first round; they were to be made of large enameled tiles that would be industrially produced and therefore in accordance with the new stipulations for mechanization.¹³⁶

If the aim of the competition was to affirm the new direction of Soviet architecture, then the shelving of the Palace of the Soviets project in 1959 marks the end of this process. The only Palace to be built finally in the area was the Palace of the Pioneers, whose scale was too small to compete with the imposing mass of the MSU. There, many of the ideas formulated in the Palace of the Soviets competition, ranging from the emphasis on horizontality to the murals of “industrialized” ceramics, found their realization. Through a long series of conferences, publications, and architectural exercises on paper, Soviet modernism had finally found a concrete

¹³³ *Dvoret's Sovetov*, 118.

¹³⁴ *Dvoret's Sovetov*, 112.

¹³⁵ “Obsuzhdenie konkursnykh proektov Dvortsa Pionerov SSSR,” *Arkhitektura SSSR* 1 (January 1960): 40.

¹³⁶ *Dvoret's Sovetov*, 116. A similar argument is put forth by the architects of the Palace of the Pioneers, see above.

form by the end of the decade – and the flat, stylized, yet almost always figurative murals that accompanied it would become a staple until well into the 1980s.¹³⁷

As for the fate of the Palace of the Soviets, its successor was the Kremlin Palace of Congresses, today the State Kremlin Palace [Fig. 1.52], a single-auditorium version that was designed by Mikhail Posokhin in 1959, upon the conclusion of the Palace of the Soviets competition. Inaugurated in 1961 for the 22nd Congress of the CPSU, this final Palace of a long series was built inside the Kremlin. Its restrained classicism gives it a stately character, yet it is devoid of the utopianism present in its predecessors. By the end of the 1950s, the only remainder of this architectural utopianism was an enormous circular pit by the Moscow river, at the site where Iofan's tower was to be erected. In 1958, the saga of the Palace of the Soviets reached its bathetic end: the pit of the foundations was converted into a public swimming pool [Fig. 1.52] – albeit a heated one that ranked as Europe's largest for decades to come.

¹³⁷ For more on the ongoing engagement with the synthesis of the arts in the Soviet Union during the following decades, see the conclusion.

CHAPTER 2: POLAND

A Soviet High-Rise in Warsaw

The division of Europe into two spheres of influence at the 1945 Yalta conference and the raising of the Iron Curtain created a geopolitical position for Eastern Europe that was specific to the Cold War: that of the satellite state. Implying an individual political trajectory that is nevertheless predetermined by the inescapable gravitational pull of a superpower, the term is an apt epithet for the countries of the emergent Eastern bloc. Beginning in 1948, the Soviet political system in its fully crystallized, postwar version was exported to Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and, from 1949, to the newly formed German Democratic Republic.¹ This process reversed a central and hotly contested feature of prewar Stalinism, the principle of “socialism in one country,” by establishing a wide network of such countries in Europe’s eastern half. Along with the introduction of land collectivization, centralized planning articulated in five-year plans, as well as the institution of coercive state apparatuses such the secret police, the aesthetics of Stalinism was an integral part of this export. By 1950, the dogma of Socialist Realism – and, along with it, the Stalinist model of synthesis as discussed in the previous chapter – was firmly established in the increasingly state-controlled cultural institutions of the new peoples’ republics, encompassing all aspects of artistic production.

No building represents this process of Stalinism’s westward expansion better than the Palace of Culture and Science (*Pałac Kultury i Nauki*) in Warsaw [Fig. 2.1]. Constructed in 1952-55 and standing at 777 feet tall, it initially bore Stalin’s name and was commissioned by his close associate, Vyacheslav Molotov, as a “present” to the people of Poland from the Soviet

¹ Socialist Yugoslavia occupied an exceptional position, due to the Tito-Stalin split of 1948, as will be analyzed in the following chapter.

Union, to serve as a reminder of the “lasting friendship between socialist nations.”² Since its inception, it has been interpreted as the definitive symbol of the forced Stalinization of a country that, unlike its neighbors Czechoslovakia and Hungary, had limited prewar communist activity. As a result, Poland had been especially resistant to Soviet rule: Stalin had famously said that imposing communism on Catholic Poland was as absurd as fitting a cow with a saddle.³ This might be the reason why, along with Poland’s status as the largest Soviet satellite that had suffered immense wartime losses in both population and infrastructure, that ruined Warsaw was chosen as the site for the first Stalinist high-rise to be constructed outside of the Soviet Union.

The Palace of Culture was a Soviet export in every sense: it was designed by the Russian Lev Rudnev, the architect of the Moscow State University, in the image of the other seven Moscow high-rises, sporting the same gradual massing of volumes, profuse ornamentation and distinctive spire. More strikingly, it was entirely constructed by Soviet workers, who were sent en masse to the Polish capital and lived in a temporary camp that was constructed in the outskirts of the city for that purpose [Fig. 2.2].⁴ Most of the building’s materials were shipped from the Soviet Union, including prefabricated ornaments such as cornices and balusters, and other furnishings such as the porcelain chandeliers that gave it a distinct late-Stalinist look. [Fig. 2.3-2.4] The Warsaw Palace of Culture was then another Moscow *vysotka*, its relationship to its

² See the propaganda pamphlet published on the occasion of the Palace’s inauguration, Zygmunt Wdowiński and Jan Jacoby, *Pałac Kultury i Nauki im. Józefa Stalina* (Warsaw: Sport i Turystyka, 1955). The friendship between socialist nations is a key trope of postwar Stalinist culture, often described by the Russian term *druzhba narodov*.

³ The erection of a building in another country’s capital as a marker of Russian imperialism has its precedents in the late nineteenth century. In 1912, the enormous Aleksandr Nevsky Russian Orthodox Cathedral was inaugurated in Warsaw, which was promptly demolished during the short interwar period of Polish independence. Similar cathedrals dedicated to this distinctly Russian saint can be found in many Eastern European capitals, from Tallinn to Sofia.

⁴ The process of the palace’s construction is meticulously documented in the 550-page volume *Budowa PKiN*, ed. Alfred Wiślicki (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1957).

siblings in the Soviet capital reflecting the status of Poland as a satellite state. Warsaw's new, "socialist" skyline became, as it were, an extension of Moscow's.

Vladimir Paperny has described the late Stalinist period as one of "Soviet Hellenism," when Stalinist culture radiated from the center to the periphery of the socialist world.⁵ After being replicated in the Moscow "Seven Sisters," the silhouette of the unbuilt Palace of the Soviets was transposed to locations increasingly distant from the Kremlin, such as the smaller Latvian Academy of Sciences (1953-56) [Fig. 2.5] and the Warsaw Palace of Culture.⁶ It is significant that the buildings of this architectural *rayonnement* were dedicated to culture. Since the early days of the revolution, culture in a broad sense (which included science, technology and also sports) was seen as the way to produce the "New Man" – a necessary condition for the emergence of the future communist society. The 1950s was a time of proliferation of Houses of Culture in the entire Eastern bloc that catered to the visual and performing arts, sports, as well as various amateur societies.⁷ The Warsaw Palace was the hypertrophic version of such a smaller, local establishment: It provided office space for cultural and academic institutions, a vast multi-

⁵ Vladimir Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two*, 98.

⁶ Echoes of these towers can also be found in similarly stepped buildings topped with a central spire, from Bulgaria and Romania all the way to China. See, for example, the *Casa Scînteii* (House of the "Spark" newspaper) in Bucharest, 1952-56.

⁷ According to the Polish guidelines for town planning in the 50s, every town of a certain size ought to have a House of Culture. See Juliusz Dumnicki, ed., *Building and Architecture in Poland 1945-1966* (Warsaw: Interpress Publishers, 1968), 57. The Warsaw Palace did fulfill its role as a cultural hub of the capital, and its many theaters were important sites of dissident culture during the 1960s and 1970s. See Magdalena J. Zaborowska, "The Height of (Architectural) Seduction: Reading the 'Changes' through Stalin's Palace in Warsaw, Poland," *Journal of Architectural Education* 54, no. 4 (May 2001): 212. Although state-sponsored, houses of culture became central to the dissident culture from the 1960s onwards in the Eastern bloc. See Anne White, *De-Stalinization and the House of Culture: Declining State Control Over Leisure in the USSR, Poland, and Hungary, 1953-89* (London; New York: Routledge, 1990). There is a parallel development in France during the late 1950s, when André Malraux, France's first Minister of Cultural Affairs from 1959 to 1969, established an ambitious network of *maisons de la culture* across France, beginning with the one in Le Havre that was inaugurated in 1961. See the detailed report on the program: André de Baeque, *Les maisons de la culture* (Paris: Seghers, 1967).

purpose congress hall and many smaller theaters and auditoria, as well as some museums and sports facilities, including a large indoor pool.⁸

The statues of two of emblematic figures of Polish culture flank the main entrance to the Palace: the Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz and the Renaissance astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus. [Fig. 2.6] Their presence sought to mask the Soviet pedigree of the building and to assign a purportedly Polish character the Palace. The many ornaments of the building had a similar function, adding “Polishness” to a purely Soviet edifice. Following the Socialist-Realist imperative for “national form and socialist content,” a crenellation typical of sixteenth-century Polish architecture known as a Polish parapet tops all the external walls of the Palace [Fig. 2.7]. Rudnev had observed such a motif while touring the historic Polish towns of Cracow, Lublin and Zamość, while searching for such necessary “national form” [Fig. 2.8]. His unwillingness to collaborate with artists and craftspeople on equal terms and his proclivity for the type of ornamental superfluities so castigated by his colleagues back in Moscow now took on a new meaning within the context of Soviet domination of Poland. The obvious, superficial and finally unsuccessful efforts to make Stalin’s gift appear more “Polish” only exacerbated its fundamental foreignness.

The Palace was also disconnected from the surrounding urban fabric, which is arguably still the case to this day. It replaced a densely populated prewar residential neighborhood of about 3,500 inhabitants, thus expelling habitation from the city’s midtown (*sródmiście*) to the newly created housing estates (*osiedle*) in its periphery. Although some housing in the area had

⁸ Juliusz A. Chrościcki and Andrzej Rottermund, *Atlas of Warsaw's Architecture* (Warsaw: Arkady, 1978), 75. In 1977 the building housed sixteen auditoriums (among which four theaters and three cinemas, two restaurants, a sports center including a swimming pool and museums dedicated to technology and zoology. It also contained a youth center, the offices of the Polish UNESCO Committee, several institutes of the University of Warsaw and the Polish Academy of Sciences. Many of these functions continue to this day, when the Palace operated as a convention center.

survived the wartime destruction, the remaining residents were evicted and the buildings were razed to make room for the Palace. Given that the neighborhood had been predominantly Jewish, the erection of the Palace contributed to the process of obliteration of the city's Jewish heritage, which thus continued beyond 1945.⁹ This fissure with the rest of the city is emphasized by the vast featureless empty space that surrounds the building in the manner of the *parvis* of Gothic cathedrals, allowing unobstructed views of the façade. Unmatched in size by any other open space in either prewar or postwar Warsaw, this *plac Stalina* (Stalin square) was renamed as *plac defilad* (Parade Square) after the de-Stalinization of 1956, thus reflecting its status as the main rallying grounds of the Polish capital, and the stage of many official parades.

Such a parade marked the inauguration of the Palace on July 22nd 1955, on the annual Holiday of Poland's Rebirth (*święto odrodzenia Polski*). The holiday celebrated the signing of the manifesto of the Soviet-backed Committee for National Liberation in 1944 that paved the way for the establishment of the People's Republic. Every year, the authorities staged grand openings of iconic construction projects that emblemized the reconstruction of the war-torn country and the establishment of the new political order. A photograph of that parade was widely circulated in the press, as well as the many propagandist pamphlets and booklets published at the time [Fig. 2.9].¹⁰ It shows a display of *fizkultura* (physical culture), a human pyramid that is typical of state pageantry in many state-socialist countries. In this case, the formation mirrors the silhouette of the building behind it, as the performers, staggered in levels, raise their arms to mimic the crenellations of the palace. Their bodies correspond to the architectural ornaments behind them, in a literal equivalence between the anonymous bodies of the socialist citizens and

⁹ The Palace's plot abuts on the area of the Warsaw Ghetto, whose southern boundary coincided with the north side of the Palace. A persistent marker of the area's Jewish character is the name of the wide avenue in front of the Palace: *Aleje jerozolimskie* (Jerusalem Avenue), a name that has been in constant use since the early nineteenth century.

¹⁰ See Wdowiński and Jacoby, *Pałac Kultury i Nauki im. Józefa Stalina*.

the repetitive “excesses” of Stalinist architecture. Both ornaments and bodies conceal the steel, mechanically produced armature that supports both the building and the parade float. The display culminates in a single performer, who holds a flag while balancing on a globe. This was an eloquent image of the global aspirations of postwar socialism, which simultaneously recast the sphere supporting the building spire from a historicist Baroque quotation to a potent political symbol.

Yet this performance occurred too late: the Joseph Stalin Palace of Culture and Science was inaugurated more than two years after its namesake’s death. Soon after its opening, Khrushchev would deliver his Secret Speech, and Stalin’s name would promptly disappear from the public sphere in the Eastern bloc, including from the Palace’s own title. The Soviet leader’s name was also removed from all of the building’s inscriptions in 1956, as seen on the book held by a sculptural allegory of intellectual labor [Fig. 2.10]. Initially listing the patristic lineage of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, the latter was dropped from the book, thus reverting to the orthodox initial trinity of Marxism-Leninism. Poland’s architectural establishment partook in this de-Stalinization. On March 26-28 1956, shortly after the Secret Speech was first leaked in Poland, an all-Poland Congress of Architects was convened, with the aim of firmly denouncing Stalinist architecture of the sort represented by the Palace of Culture. In an ironic twist of fate, the congress was held in the Palace’s main auditorium [Fig. 2.11], the newest and largest such space in the country, in what must have been a grotesque contrast between the historicist ornaments of the interior and the resolute denouncement of ornament in the various speeches.¹¹ The conference bears many similarities with the Soviet ones examined in the previous chapter. Both cases constituted public performances of *samokritika* (or *samokrytyka*, in its Polish

¹¹ The conference proceedings were published later that year as *Ogólnopolska narada architektów: Architekci wobec nowych zadań w budownictwie, Warszawa 26-28 III 1956* (Warsaw: Komisja Wydawnictwa-Prasowa Zarządu Głównego SARP, 1956).

spelling), whereby architects openly criticized their profession, and sought for a change of direction in official architecture of their respective countries.

Yet the situation in the two countries was very different. Unlike the USSR's long Stalinist period and its gradual, if not hesitant, de-Stalinization of 1956, the two processes occurred in close succession in Poland, and with dramatic intensity. No other architect exemplifies such swift changes better than Helena Syrkus. Initially a committed modernist and a member of CIAM since its inception in 1928, she had been a founding member of the Polish Constructivist group Praesens along with her husband, Szymon.¹² Both gained prominence through their functionalist housing designs of the 1930s in Poland, culminating in Helena's appointment as one of CIAM's vice presidents (the other two being Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius) at the 1947 conference in Bridgewater. Committed to leftist politics since the interwar period, Syrkus embraced Socialist Realism with enthusiasm when it was introduced in Poland the following year. At the 1949 CIAM in Bergamo, during a session presided by Sigfried Giedion on the relation of the "man on the street" to modern architecture, she offered a scathing critique of modernism and proceeded to defend Socialist Realism to a stunned audience.¹³ She began her talk by stating the need for self-critique thus bringing a Soviet-style *samokritika* to the heart of CIAM: "After twenty years of work the moment for critique has come: in undertaking

¹² For a brief introduction to Helena Syrkus' work, see Joan Ockman, *Architecture Culture, 1943-1968: A Documentary Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, 1993), 120. On the changing political engagements of the Syrkuses from the 1920s to the 1950s, see Józef Piłatowicz, "Poglądy Heleny i Szymona Syrkusów na architekturę w latach 1925-1956," *Kwartalnik historii nauki i techniki* vol. 14 nr. (2009): 123-164. A survey of the various housing estates designed by the Syrkuses, was published in the Polish journal *Architektura* (July 1957): 250-65.

¹³ See Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 192-95. Her speech was partly reproduced by Sigfried Giedion in his *Architecture, You and Me* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 79-90, where Giedion records some of his recollections from the meeting.

this today, I also make a self-critique.”¹⁴ Repeating the Soviet critiques of modern architecture as “formalism,” she stated:

Construction is but a skeleton. It has great interest for the anatomist, but for the rest it only becomes beautiful when it is covered with fine muscles and a lovely skin. We had nothing else to offer at the time when CIAM began, and so we made a fetish of the skeleton.¹⁵

This “lovely skin” was none other than the ornaments that covered the steel skeletons of buildings such as the Palace of Culture and the Moscow *vysotki*. Yet, only seven years later, at the 1956 conference in Warsaw, inside the “lovely skin” of the Palace of Culture, Syrkus performed another, albeit brief, *samokritika* in front of her Polish colleagues. She recanted her enthusiastic embrace of Stalinist architecture and voiced her support for functionalism and rationalized construction.¹⁶ As if Stalinism and her Bergamo speech had never happened, she and her husband Szymon then returned to their modernist positions for the remaining of their careers.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the de-Stalinization of architecture in the USSR was a largely top-down process that was mandated by executive fiat and proceeded in a carefully paced and thoroughly controlled manner. In contrast, in Poland de-Stalinization occurred by a loosening of the state’s grip on cultural matters; it was *allowed* to happen. Unlike the twenty-year reign of Stalin in the USSR, Polish Stalinism (and therefore, Socialist Realism) lasted for about seven years. This meant that the prewar avant-garde, Socialist Realism and postwar modernism proceeded in close succession, as exemplified by Helena Syrkus’ own, albeit extreme, trajectory. For this reason, it was feasible for committed modernists (such as Jerzy Sołtan, discussed below) to remain in the margins of the country’s architectural and artistic

¹⁴ Reproduced in full in International Congresses for Modern Architecture, *Documents: 7 CIAM, Bergamo, 1949* (Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1979), not paginated. The speech is also published in Joan Ockman, *Architecture Culture, 1943-1968: A Documentary Anthology*, 120-122.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁶ See her brief speech in *Ogólnopolska narada architektów*, 485.

establishment during the Stalinist interlude, and to reemerge during the Thaw. It is due to such historical particularities that the “modernism with a human face” of post-Stalinist Poland was distinct from that of the USSR and produced some of the most original articulations of art and architecture in the Eastern bloc.

The “Polish October” of 1956, a series of bloodless mass protests in many Polish cities, was one of the first street-level manifestations of de-Stalinization.¹⁷ Outside the Soviet Union, Khrushchev’s Secret Speech was seen as an opportunity to openly criticize the authorities, and resulted in a sudden release of energies that had been suppressed since the establishment of the new world order in 1945. Starting in early October 1956 at the western Polish city of Poznań, citizens demanded reforms and a more open form of government. Soon enough, images of crowds holding banners displaced those of the ordered human pyramid of the Palace of Culture’s inauguration in the press [Fig. 2.12]. The Polish October presaged the watershed event of this period, the Hungarian Revolution of November, which raised demands for a democratic type of government that sought to exit the Soviet satellites’ predetermined orbits around Moscow. The Warsaw Pact tanks on the streets of Budapest showed to the whole world that the post-Stalinist “communism with a human face” would have firm boundaries, often drawn in blood.

Still, reformism in Poland never quite crossed the threshold into rejecting state socialism altogether and demanding a multi-party liberal democracy, as in Hungary. During the second half of the 1950s, Poland became the epicenter of a new wave of Eastern European Marxism that was often called Marxist Humanism, a parallel yet relatively understudied phenomenon to the

¹⁷ On the history of the Polish October, see Paweł Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite: Poland, 1956* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009). Despite its pivotal role in the events of 1956 in Eastern Europe, the Polish October is often overshadowed in Western historiography by the more violent Hungarian revolution that ensued. This is perhaps because it was mostly peaceful, unlike the violent invasion of the Warsaw Pact forces that made the Hungarian revolution an episode of the Cold War, and thus more critical for Western interests.

rise of the New Left in the West.¹⁸ Driven by a desire to critique Stalinism from a Marxist perspective, philosophers such as Leszek Kołakowski, Zygmunt Bauman, Bronisław Baczko, Maria Hirszowicz and others sought to revitalize Marxism by shifting emphasis to Marx's early philosophical manuscripts, which focused more on the problem of alienation than on the political economy later articulated in the *Capital*.¹⁹ Mirroring contemporary efforts of the Western European "New Left," this loosely defined "Warsaw School" emerged around 1954 and reached the peak of its activity towards the end of the decade. Although critical of the establishment and its grip on civil liberties, these thinkers were avowedly Marxist during the 1950s, and many of them were also members of the PZPR, the Polish United Workers Party. In the first years of the 1960s, it had become obvious that the Thaw could not deliver on its promises for a "human face," thus putting the increasingly disillusioned Warsaw School on a collision course with the orthodox Marxist doctrine espoused by the authorities. This trajectory culminated in the students protests of 1968, which the Polish establishment saw as a direct consequence of such academic activity and therefore targeted many professors in Warsaw University and elsewhere.²⁰ Shortly thereafter, many key figures such as Kołakowski and Bauman emigrated to the West, where they established academic careers on topics that were often different from those that had preoccupied

¹⁸ A comprehensive survey in English is James H. Satterwhite, *Varieties of Marxist Humanism: Philosophical Revision in Postwar Eastern Europe* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), which discusses revisionist Marxism in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. For more on Marxist Humanism in Yugoslavia and the activities of the *Praxis* group, see Chapter Three.

¹⁹ For a selection of Kołakowski's earlier writings translated into English, see Leszek Kołakowski, *Toward a Marxist Humanism: Essays on the Left Today* (New York: Grove Press, 1968); Leszek Kołakowski, *Marxism and Beyond: on Historical Understanding and Individual Responsibility* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1969). Some of the texts from his Polish period are also included in the recent Leszek Kołakowski, *My Correct Views on Everything*, ed. Zbigniew Janowski (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2005). A recent analysis of Bauman's "Polish" period and his intellectual roots in Socialist Poland is Keith Tester and Michael Hviid Jacobsen, eds., *Bauman Before Postmodernity: Invitation, Conversations and Annotated Bibliography, 1953-1989* (Aalborg: Aalborg University Press, 2005).

²⁰ The trajectory of reformist thinking developed differently in Czechoslovakia during the 1960s, where it was eventually translated into concrete policies and liberalizations associated with the Prague Spring of 1968. As with Hungary twelve years earlier, the tanks of the Warsaw Pact intervened to prevent a reform-minded satellite from exiting the Soviet orbit.

them in Poland.²¹ In 1976, years after his emigration, Kołakowski pronounced reformism dead, claiming: “the concept of non-totalitarian communism... to many of us today seems like the idea of fried snowballs.”²²

One of Kołakowski’s essays that best encapsulates the spirit of the Thaw in Poland was “What Is Socialism?,” a pithy text initially written in 1956 for the student journal *Po prostu*, yet was never published due to censorship.²³ Translated in the West and circulated in Poland in manuscript form, it did not reach the wide domestic audience it intended at the time, yet today serves as a valuable testament to both the aspirations and the disillusionments of an entire generation of Polish intellectuals.²⁴ Kołakowski begins the essay by stating: “We intend to tell you what socialism is. But first we must tell you what it is not - and our views on this matter were once very different from what they are at present.” He then offers a list of bullet points of what socialism is not, such as “a society in which the leaders appoint themselves; a society in which ten people live in one room; a tyranny, an oligarchy, a bureaucracy; a state that gives literary prizes to hacks and knows better than painters what painting is best,” and so forth. After describing Stalinism in great detail, from the larger institutional structures to the everyday experience of common citizens, Kołakowski briefly concludes: “That was the first part. And now, pay attention, because we are going to tell you what socialism is. Here is what socialism is:

²¹ An exception is Kołakowski’s monumental, three-volume history of Marxist thought, *Main currents of Marxism*, first published in Britain in 1978. Leszek Kołakowski, *Main currents of Marxism*, vols. 1-3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

²² The precise origins of the quote are elusive today, although it is often repeated in writings on Kołakowski.

²³ The English translation is published in Kołakowski, *My Correct Views on Everything*, 62-65.

²⁴ At the time, the article was posted on noticeboards at Warsaw University, but was removed soon thereafter.

Socialism is a system that... But what's the point of going into all these details? It's very simple: Socialism is just a really wonderful thing."²⁵

With his deadpan humor, Kołakowski condensed the problem of 1956: although it had become clear that Stalinism was a nightmare that had failed to deliver the better world that it had promised, the precise direction for the future was unclear. In the wake of Stalinism, the only thing that could be said with certainty about socialism is that it was a “wonderful thing” that was still desirable: any further elaboration regarding its precise nature or the paths for attaining it risked either repeating the Stalinist pitfalls or becoming a point of contest between competing factions. Arguably, this is how the synthesis of the arts and artistic collaboration functioned during this period: although universally seen as a “wonderful thing,” its precise definition was fluid at best - if not outrightly contested between artists, architects and critics with different views on how it should be achieved.

The formidable reformist thought of Kołakowski and Bauman have their corollary in the highly original architectural, artistic and theoretical activity of the Polish neo-avant-garde of the late 1950s, which often centered around the concept of the synthesis of the arts. Because of Poland's particular position in the Eastern bloc, the concurrent reforms of politics and aesthetics during the Thaw developed in a different, more experimental direction than in the Soviet Union. Yet, to understand their emergence one has to look past the moment of 1956, before the onset of the Thaw, and before the erection of the Palace of Culture, to the first half of the 1950s when a distinctly Polish brand of Socialist Realism was emerging from the construction sites of the war-torn Polish cities.

²⁵ Ibid., 65.

A Socialist Renaissance

On July 22nd 1953, on the annual Holiday of Poland's Rebirth, president Bolesław Bierut inaugurated the newly reconstructed main square of Warsaw's Old Town [Fig. 2.13]. Originally an ensemble of elegant townhouses dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was severely damaged following the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, when the Nazi occupying forces systematically dynamited most of the Polish capital prior to surrendering it to the advancing Red Army [Fig. 2.14].²⁶ The September 1953 issue of *Architektura*, the official journal of the Architects' Association of the People's Republic of Poland, celebrated the restoration with a cover featuring a clock from one of the square's corners [Fig. 2.15]. The year 1953, etched underneath in sgraffito, is emphasized in the photograph, which does not attempt to conceal the inauthenticity of a clock that was entirely conceived and executed in 1953 on a location where no clock existed before the war.²⁷ This anachronism suggests a parallel between the sixteenth century and the early years of the People's Republic – a trope that was encapsulated in the ubiquitous word *odrodzenie* (rebirth), which was used to describe both the culture of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the rebirth of postwar Poland as a socialist country.

Although Warsaw's Old Town is a widely studied case of historical reconstruction, it is often examined in isolation from the greater political and artistic context of Stalinist Poland from

²⁶ The reconstruction of Warsaw's Old Town has been the subject of a long list of publications that began in the 1950s and continue to this day, and range from popular photobooks to more scholarly studies. Many of them rely on striking before-and-after juxtapositions that emphasize both the immensity of the destruction and the accomplishment of the reconstruction. Some examples are: *Przewodnik po Warszawie* (Warsaw: Stolica, 1956); Aleksander Wojciechowski, *Rynek Staromiejski* (Warsaw: Sztuka, 1956); Adolf Ciborowski, *Warsaw, a City Destroyed and Rebuilt* (Warsaw: Polonia, 1964); Jerzy A. Bałdyga and Jan Zachwatowicz, *The Old Town and the Royal Castle in Warsaw* (Warsaw: Arkady, 1988).

²⁷ The clock marks the site where most visitors first encounter Warsaw's Old Town Square. Underneath it, a marble plaque reads:

“The Old Town Square. A monument to national culture and the revolutionary struggles of the people of Warsaw, reduced to rubble by fascist occupiers in 1944. The government of People's Poland lifted it from ruins and restored it to the nation in the years 1951-53.”

which it emerged.²⁸ Yet the rebuilding of Old Warsaw developed in parallel to the construction of the city's new, Socialist-Realist buildings. The two processes were not just concurrent, but also conjoined: they employed similar architectural forms inspired by the artistic legacy of Renaissance and Baroque Poland, often executed by the same artists and craftspeople. While the restorers of the Old Town strove to salvage from the ruins original fragments of cornices, finials and murals in order to integrate them into the reconstructed early-modern monuments, architects in other parts of the capital were eclectically inventing similar forms for the new buildings of the People's Republic. The synthesis of the arts was a guiding principle for both efforts at reconstruction, the purportedly historically accurate one of the Old Town and the freer interpretation of historical motifs in the city's new Socialist-Realist buildings.

Before the Palace of Culture, the largest Socialist-Realist project in the center of Warsaw was the Marszałkowska Housing District (*Marszałkowska Dzielnica Mieszkaniowa*), which is usually referred to by its Polish initials, MDM [Fig. 2.16].²⁹ Unlike the Soviet-designed Palace of Culture, the MDM was a product of a team of Polish architects led by Józef Sigalin and Stanisław Jankowski, who began working on it in 1950. An integral component of the six-year plan for the reconstruction Warsaw that was presented that year by President Bierut, this was the Warsaw equivalent to the contemporaneous Stalin-Allee in Berlin (today known as Karl-Marx-Allee.)³⁰ Spanning several long blocks along the prewar axis of Marszałkowska Street south of

²⁸ A notable exception is Piotr Majewski, *Ideologia i konserwacja: architektura zabytkowa w Polsce w czasach socrealizmu* (Warsaw: Trio, 2009). Majewski traces the political background of historical reconstruction in postwar Poland, through a detailed analysis of the bureaucratic apparatus (official bodies, decrees and organizations) that was involved in the effort.

²⁹ See Jan Mucharski, *MDM: Marszałkowska Dzielnica Mieszkaniowa* (Warsawa: Spółdzielczy Instytut Wydawniczy "Kraj", 1952); Martyna Obarska, *MDM: między utopią a codziennością* (Warsaw: Mazowieckie Centrum Kultury i Sztuki, 2010).

³⁰ *Sześćoletni plan odbudowy Warszawy: Szatę graficzną, wykresy, plany i perspektywy opracowano na podstawie materiałów i projektów Biura Urbanistycznego Warszawy* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1950). This large, leather-bound volume was published in Polish, Russian, English, French and German. For a

the midtown district and the Palace of Culture, it was initially intended to provide housing for 45,000 people, along with facilities such as schools, clinics, theaters and shops [Fig 2.17].³¹ Despite largely escaping destruction during the Second World War, the existing buildings in the area were razed and the street was significantly widened to accommodate the broader sidewalks and the colossal arcades of boxy ionic pilasters in grey granite. At the center of the ensemble stood the monumental Constitution Square, named after the new Polish constitution, which was modeled on the Soviet one and was inaugurated on the annual Holiday of Rebirth of 1952, when the first section of the MDM was opened with a grand procession through the square [Fig. 2.18]. This double inauguration of new political and architectural structures marked the apex of Stalinization in Poland – a process that had already begun in 1948.

The entire complex is profusely decorated with ornaments in stone, metal, ceramic, *sgraffito* and mosaic [Fig. 2.19-2.21]. Most prominent is an extensive program of colossal figurative reliefs that depict an array of model socialist citizens of both genders: farmers, workers, soldiers, teachers and others, rendered in a heroic Socialist Realist style. [Fig. 2.22] On the north side of Constitution Square, a series of six limestone reliefs prominently placed above arches depict the process of the project's creation, from its conception and design to its construction [Fig. 2.23-2.28]. As in the other reliefs of the MDM, men and women are equally represented, reflecting the greater belief that socialism ought to be built through the equal participation of genders. This rhetoric of equality governs the entire series: equal space is given

comparison between the Karl-Marx-Alee and the MDM, see Maria Wojtysiak and Monika Kapa-Cichocka, *KMA-MDM: Warschau: das architektonische Erbe des Realsozialismus in Warschau* (Warsaw: Dom spotkań z historią: 2011).

³¹ The initial plan was never fully realized: after the construction of the first two phases (named MDM I and MDM II), the rest of the street was developed after the de-Stalinization of 1956 in a simpler, socialist-modern style.

to different professions, from the administrators, architects and engineers, to artists and craftspeople responsible for the decorations, to the welders and bricklayers.

As works of art integrated into architecture, the Constitution Square reliefs are an example of the synthesis of the arts; at the same time, they give concrete form to the discourse on synthesis by depicting the process of its realization. Their focus on the community of the construction site encapsulates the equivalence between artistic synthesis and social harmony that was such a driving force behind the phenomenon. Adorning an architectural complex that emerged from one of the largest construction sites in the Polish capital, they represent an idealized version of such a site, devoid of the divisions between classes and genders that governed the Western *chantiers*.³² This rhetoric was also transposed onto the photographs that were published soon thereafter in propaganda publications that accompanied large-scale projects such as MDM.³³ These depicted the collaboration between intellectual and manual laborers, as seen in the image of an engineer talking to a foreman over blueprints [Fig. 2.29]. The published photograph appears retouched so that the engineer's sleeves are rolled up above his elbows, thus signifying his proximity to the manual laborers of the site. Similar moments of communion and solidarity between traditionally divided groups of people can be seen in other images from the volume: between generations, between genders, as well as between specialists and non-specialists, such as the soldiers and the secretaries from a publishing house who "spontaneously" left their posts in order to help the builders clear the rubble [Fig. 2.30].

While these photographs rely on tropes from the Soviet 1930s and the glorification of building sites in publications such as *USSR in Construction*, the Constitution Square reliefs draw

³² See Le Corbusier's 1952 speech in Venice on the "chantiers de synthèse" in Venice, discussed in the Introduction.

³³ The best example is the oversize clothbound folio Stanisław Jankowski, *MDM: Marszałkowska 1730-1954* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1955).

on a more historical lineage. Many of the figures assume classically sculptural poses, and their arrangement recalls Ancient Roman or Renaissance reliefs. In addition, themes such as the presentation of architectural models to commissioners or the on-site carving of stone architectural members are recurrent in Renaissance art. These references to the culture of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are not isolated: they are part of a greater engagement with the early modern period in Stalinist Poland, manifestations of what could be termed a “Socialist Renaissance.” This took on many forms, from the widespread employment of the term *odrodzenie* (rebirth) to describe the new political status quo to the multiple quotations of Renaissance culture discussed here.

At the same time, the historical period of the Renaissance was being recast in socialist terms. This reached its apex in October 1953, at a five-day conference on the Renaissance in Poland organized by the Polish Academy of Sciences, with the participation of historians of art, music and literature.³⁴ With titles such as “The Art of the Polish Renaissance as an Expression of Social Ideology,” the conference papers relied on orthodox Marxist modes of cultural analysis, such as the theory of base and superstructure. Focusing on sociopolitical issues, they were positioned as a rebuttal to the prewar readings of Renaissance culture, which were condemned as “formalist” and autonomist” (*autonomistyczny*). Some of the speakers interpreted the rise of naturalism during the Renaissance as an expression of the tastes of the people, of a “people’s realism” (*ludowy realizm*) that superseded a medieval art dictated by clerics. Casting aside any issues of religiosity during the Renaissance, the period was seen as thoroughly secularized. In addition, the anti-papal impulses of the Reformation were generalized into an overarching anti-clericism, which in turn became the main interpretative angle for the entire period. In this view,

³⁴ A summary of the conference was published in *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, the prime art history journal of Poland. B. W., “Historia sztuki na Sesji Odrodzenia w Polsce,” *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* vol. 14 no. 2 (February 1954): 280-86.

the anti-Gothic turn of the fifteenth century was at its core directed against the church (if not against religion altogether) and was driven by the desires of the people, the “plebeian current in Polish visual art” (*plebejski nurt plastyki polskiej*) that had been suppressed during the feudal Middle Ages.

Many of these arguments appear unconvincing today, as they selectively interpret the Renaissance by ignoring the central role of the nobility and the persistent influence of the church. Despite being daring and imaginative, as well as challenging of the established history of the period, they all essentially strove to reach a predetermined conclusion, the affirmation and naturalization of the Stalinist worldview. The Renaissance was thus viewed as a harbinger of Stalinism’s triumph in 1950s, when the long battle for both secularism and realism was finally won. Conversely, the discourse of Socialist Realism, which since the 1930s had often relied on the presumption that “the people” have always had an innate preference for realism, was retroactively projected onto the Renaissance. The mirroring between the two periods was made explicit in the closing remarks of the conference, when many speakers affirmed the need for contemporary art to be inspired by the progressive accomplishments of the visual arts of the Renaissance. This is how history often functioned in Stalinism: as a source of legitimation for current choices.

For the contemporary Russian writer Boris Groys, this type of approach to history is a key characteristic of Stalinist art:

Since socialist realism shared the ‘historical optimism,’ ‘love of the people,’ ‘love of life,’ ‘genuine humanism’ and other progressive properties characteristic of all art expressing the interests of the oppressed and progressive classes everywhere in all historical periods, it acquired the right to use any progressive art of the past as a model. Frequently cited examples of such progressive art included Greek antiquity, the Italian Renaissance, and nineteenth-century Russian realism.³⁵

³⁵ Groys, *Total Art of Stalinism*, 46.

Within the totalizing context of Stalinist culture, the opposing categories of “progressive” and “reactionary” that structured every value judgment in the Soviet Union could be applied to the totality of human history:

all ‘progressive’ world culture acquires a superhistorical significance and eternal relevance that make it the contemporary of any new ‘progressive’ aspiration, and ‘antipopular,’ ‘reactionary,’ ‘decadent’ culture assumes a no less superhistorical, universal significance that reveals its inner sameness at any given moment of history.³⁶

This rigid, binary mode of thinking is present in many Soviet publications on the synthesis of the arts that invariably begin with long historical overviews that locate synthesis on all “great” and “progressive” art of the past, from Egypt to Ancient Greece and the Renaissance.³⁷ This approach already began in the 1930s and the earlier formulations of synthesis under Stalinism: it is already present in a lecture by the Soviet art historian and critic David Efimovich Arkin, delivered in December 1934.³⁸ Yet this universalizing scope was altered when such theories were exported to Poland in the postwar period. While in the Soviet Union the Renaissance was one the many points of historical reference, it gained complete primacy in Socialist Poland. It displaced other periods in the historical imaginary and became the sole golden age of art that ought to be emulated. Arguably, this was a result of adapting the internationalist Soviet discourse for a national context – a process that took place in many Soviet

³⁶ Ibid., 47.

³⁷ A similar phenomenon can be discerned in some Western countries, where publications on synthesis often began with long historical overviews. The most notable example is the long introduction to Paul Damaz’s *Art in European Architecture* from 1956, discussed in the Introduction. The key difference is that under state socialism the choice of historical examples was clearly and avowedly ideological, as was the division of history into “good,” proto-socialist eras and “bad,” proto-bourgeois ones. This approach continued well into the 1980s, and is present in later volumes on the synthesis of the arts, such as Georgii P. Stepanov, *Kompozitsionnye problemy sinteza iskusstv* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1984), discussed in the conclusion.

³⁸ The lecture was delivered at the Union of Soviet Architects (*Soyuz Sovetskikh Arkhitektorov*) alongside ones by Nikolai Kolli and others, and is preserved at the Russian State Archives of Art and Literature, (RGALI) 2606/1/ 55.

satellites after 1945. For a country that had faced a steady political decline from the seventeenth century onwards, leading up to its partition in the eighteenth century and its complete disappearance from the map until 1918, the reign of the Jagiellonian dynasty (1385-1572) was often viewed as the period of greatest Polish prosperity. While Stalinist appropriations of the past took on a universal, “superhistorical” aspect, as argued by Groys, within the context of the satellite states such as Poland these efforts often focused on specific aspects of national history.

In addition, the particular conditions of postwar Poland were directly related to this strong focus on the early modern period. After all, the architecture of the Polish Renaissance had been systematically destroyed during the Second World War in cities like Warsaw and Gdańsk, and thus became the focus of postwar historical reconstruction. Restored during the peak of Stalinism, Warsaw’s Old Town became the prime locus of this Socialist Renaissance. The conservation guidelines established by the Office for the Reconstruction of the Capital (*Biuro Odbudowy Stolicy*) clearly demonstrate such a folding of the early modern period into the contemporary realities of the People’s Republic.³⁹ According to them, the Old Town should be an integral part of the socialist plan for the rebuilding of the capital, and should serve contemporary functions. In fact, a housing estate (*osiedle*) with communal apartments was established in a few adjacent historical townhouses, whose facades were preserved while their interiors were radically altered in order to comply with the new housing guidelines. Like the aforementioned clock on the main square’s corner, such historical aberrations were points of pride during the time: “Our society encountered the new face of the Old Town, where the

³⁹ The guidelines are reproduced in Piotr Biegański, “Odbudowa starego miasta w Warszawie,” *Ochrona Zabytków* vol. 6, no. 2/3 (December 1953): 81. Founded in 1947, *Ochrona Zabytków* (*Protection of Monuments*) was a quarterly journal jointly published by the Administration of Protection and Conservation of Monuments of the Ministry of Culture, and the Association of Art Historians. It thus focused on both the administrative aspects of historical conservation and the art historical research that supported it, thus making it an ideal source for the examination of the “Socialist Renaissance” developed here.

cleaned, completed and further developed forms of historic architecture began to cohabit with the achievements of the artistic culture of our time.”⁴⁰

The Stalinist division of history into “progressive” and “reactionary” eras became much more specific within the context of postwar reconstruction in Poland. The entire campaign was explicitly focused on “the best periods of the city’s artistic and cultural development,” which were none other than the fifteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries.⁴¹ All subsequent phases were excised from the restoration as unnecessary additions. Jan Zachwatowicz, an esteemed architectural historian and one of the leaders of the reconstruction effort, stated in 1953 that the only exceptions to complete historical reconstruction were such additions from the “capitalist era”, whose only purpose was to maximize profit by exploiting the limited plots.⁴² This kind of judgments between “good” and “bad” aspects of history explain why the vast seventeenth-century royal palace, which occupied a central place in the Old Town, was only restored in the late 1970s, thus leaving a prominent gap in the area for decades. As the seat of the Polish monarchs, it could not easily fit the ideological framework of the Socialist Renaissance, and was thus left to languish.⁴³

With the capitalist era that divided them suppressed, the early modern period and the 1950s could thus begin to cohabit. This cohabitation centered around the synthesis of the arts, which both periods had in common. The restoration of the historic facades of Old Warsaw, executed by members of the Association of Polish Artists (*Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków*, ZPAP) led by Jan Seweryn Sokołowski, became a key testing ground for the development of the contemporary synthesis of the arts in Poland [Fig. 2.31]. Many of the participating artists, such

⁴⁰ Biegański, “Odbudowa starego miasta w Warszawie,” 83.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴² Jan Zachwatowicz, “Stare Miasto Warszawa wraca do życia,” *Ochrona Zabytków* vol. 6, no. 2/3 (December 1953): 74.

⁴³ See Piotr Majewski, *Ideologia i konserwacja*, 158-91.

as the painter Bohdan Urbanowicz (1911-1994), would become important proponents of the synthesis of the arts in the years to come.⁴⁴ Ironically, Urbanowicz had first practiced the *sgraffito* technique, which was so widespread in the Old Town, while working on the historicist facades of the MDM housing project.⁴⁵ He then transferred those skills to the “original” context of the Old Town, and then wrote an extensive essay about its polychrome facades in a 1953 issue of *Ochrona Zabytków* dedicated to the neighborhood.⁴⁶ For Urbanowicz, the facade restorations were a central issue for contemporary Polish art and architecture, as they reflected the new sociopolitical conditions of Poland. The work on the Old Town did not just aim to repair the damages caused by the war, but most importantly, to reverse the façade restorations of the 1920s and 1930s, which he considered as frivolous and historically inaccurate, motivated more by the artists’ individual whimsies than the social responsibility of historical restoration. His critique was political at its core: the unfettered capitalism of the interwar period gave rise to excessive individualism, as each artist executed their assigned façade without regard for the work of their peers or for the complete ensemble. This created an eclectic, disjointed result, which the restoration of the 1950s sought to reverse. Imbued by the collectivist ethos of socialism, the square was treated as an indivisible whole, as artists and architects worked together in a spirit that Urbanowicz imagined was closer to the pre-capitalist working conditions from which the square had emerged in the first place.⁴⁷ The murals were emphatically pre-industrial. They lent a

⁴⁴ For more on the ZPAP, see Aleksander Wojciechowski, ed., *Polskie życie artystyczne w latach 1945-1960* (Warsaw: Polska Akademia Nauk, Instytut Sztuki, 1992), 100-101.

⁴⁵ In 1952 Urbanowicz published an essay analyzing the prominence of sculpture and painting at the MDM. Bohdan Urbanowicz, “Dyskusyjne zagadnienia malarstwa i rzeźby M.D.M.,” *Przegląd Artystyczny* 4 (April 1952): 17-23.

⁴⁶ Bohdan Urbanowicz, “Dwie polichromie Starego Rynku,” *Ochrona Zabytków* vol. 6, no. 2/3 (December 1953): 142-156.

⁴⁷ This insistent focus on the urban scale, and not on individual buildings, recalled the socialist masterplans for Moscow, which similarly operated on the level of large ensembles, rather on individual buildings.

“human” character to the restored buildings, which had been robbed of them by the mechanical means and the steel, cement and other modern materials that were employed in their reconstruction – a constant theme in contemporary discussions of synthesis on both sides of the Iron curtain. Yet in Urbanowicz’s view, the mere use of “handmade” forms was not sufficient for the “humanization” of architecture; this could only be achieved through the true collaboration between artists and architects. In an argument that recalls the Soviet discussions on synthesis, Urbanowicz distinguished two types of synthesis between art and architecture: the ornamentation of a preexisting building (which he associated with capitalism and the interwar period) and the true participation of artists in the shaping of architecture, which he saw as the way forward for synthesis under socialism.⁴⁸ These two in turn were associated with two different modes of historical reconstruction, the “reactionary” one of the interwar period and the “progressive,” one of the 1950s.

In this context, the Renaissance was seen as the origin of this “good” type of synthesis, when composite works consisting of architecture, painting and sculpture were still whole before the forces of capitalism and imperialism divided them into exchangeable commodities, bound for galleries and private collections. Such ideas were not limited to the Eastern bloc. Already in 1946, Fernand Léger, a card-carrying communist and thus one of the few Western modern artists who were popular east of the Iron Curtain, wrote: “The future certainly cries out for the collaboration of the three major art forms – architecture, painting, sculpture. No period since the Italian Renaissance has understood this artistic collectivity.”⁴⁹ Indeed, the synthetic impulse of the Renaissance was so pervasive that many masters such as Leonardo and Michelangelo were

⁴⁸ Urbanowicz, “Dwie polichromie Starego Rynku,” 156.

⁴⁹ Fernand Leger, “Modern Architecture and Color” in *Functions of Painting* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973): 149-154, cited in Christopher E. M. Pearson, “Integrations of Art and Architecture in the Work of Le Corbusier: Theory and Practice from Ornamentalism to the ‘Synthesis of the Major Arts’” (PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 1995), 334.

held up as challenging the very division between art and architecture by practicing both simultaneously.

The Socialist Renaissance of the early 1950s was therefore intended to reconcile the competing temporalities of the new People's republic, by accounting for a lost past, to propel Poland into their aspired future. Each of the two construction sites of Warsaw examined here, the MDM and the Old Town, represent one of these functions: the Old Town focused on the past and strove for historical accuracy, whereas the MDM freely drew from the past to construct a better future. This meant that the Old Town as it reemerged from the ashes was no more "authentic" than the historicist phantasies of Socialist Realism; both were manifestations of the same construct of the Socialist Renaissance. In fact, both these terms, so popular during the period, each simultaneously address multiple time registers. Firstly, "socialism," as it was employed in the Eastern bloc, was used to describe the existing, transitional system that would eventually lead to Communism, which in turn was always relegated to the foreseeable future, the complete abolition of classes that would soon be attained.⁵⁰ In short, communism was a form of political eschatology, not a lived reality – and the ruling parties were called communist because of their commitment to this final goal, not because of the day-to-day policies they implemented. The wholesale naming of such countries as "communist" by Western observers within the context of the Cold War, on the other hand, obliterated this dialectic between transitional socialism and deferred communism.

Secondly, the term "Renaissance" performs another historical operation that points the opposite way, toward the past: it implies three successive eras, an originary one of birth, followed by a dormant stage or "death" and then a moment of rebirth in the present, from which

⁵⁰ After Stalin, the attainment of communism was seen as increasingly immanent. Many leaders (most famously Nikita Khrushchev) would even issue predictions about the precise year when communism would be reached, constantly revising them as time went by.

this historical sequence is articulated. When such “Renaissance of Poland” (*odrodzenie Polski*) was pronounced by the authorities in the 1950s, it presumed a capitalist Dark Age that spanned from the late eighteenth century to the end of the Second World War. This bourgeois period was systematically excised from postwar Warsaw. During reconstruction, many buildings of the period that had survived the war unscathed were promptly demolished, deemed as unsanitary tenements that ought to make way for the new, socialist communal apartments, as seen in the aforementioned case of the MDM housing project. The publications of the time made such comparisons with the nineteenth century explicit: photo spreads of the prewar, “capitalist” Marszałkowska street were published with a large X crossing them out; a long series of before-and-after comparisons juxtaposed the living conditions inside the capitalist tenements and the new socialist housing, accompanied with firsthand accounts of citizens who had experienced both [Fig. 2.32].

Such attacks on nineteenth century architecture were commonplace in early twentieth-century modernism, yet they sound surprising today when voiced from within the equally historicist position of postwar Socialist Realism. Nonetheless, the two historicisms are not identical. The nineteenth-century variant was governed by the changing tastes of the privileged few, whereas Socialist-Realist historicism, as analyzed above, was driven by the superhistorical division of human culture into progressive and reactionary variants that Groys has discussed. The “correct” historicism that should be practiced under Socialism ought to be an ideologically motivated engagement with specific periods, which were seen as useful precursors to the current political system, and could serve as examples for future action. The motives were thus (purportedly) collective and social, not subjective, and were clearly avowed, argued and

articulated. Thus, no personal taste for history was involved – only a systematic and total historical operation, of managing the past for the purposes of attaining a specific future.

It was within such a historical operation that the synthesis of the arts became possible again. During the bourgeois nineteenth century, the ur-synthesis of the arts had unraveled, as neo-Classical paintings hung inside neo-Gothic buildings with neo-Moorish interiors. Socialist Realism was thus an effort to discipline historicism according to a totalizing ideology.⁵¹ Although it is commonplace to interpret Socialist Realism as *retardataire*, as a lag or regression within the historical unfolding of modernism, I would argue that its temporality is much more complex: as it strove to utilize the past in order to build the future, it always seemed out of time, belonging either to a utopian future or to a distant past, but never the lived present. This paradox can be seen in another relief from the MDM housing project, the final in the series of colossal model citizens previously discussed, which depicts all of them, again, in a kind of reunion on the occasion of a particular historical moment: the inauguration of the building they adorn, its date clearly marked above them. [Fig. 2.33] Executed before the building's completion, this was conceived as an image of the future – a specific, imminently attainable one. After the inauguration, it functioned as an image of the past, depicting a particular moment in history. Yet it did not document this history: instead, it had anticipated it and thus contributed to its creation.

With the advent of the Thaw, this mode of oscillation between past and future was itself relegated to history. In 1964 Adolf Ciborowski, the chief architect of Warsaw, published a widely circulated book on the reconstruction of the Polish capital.⁵² Writing after the definitive triumph of modernism over Socialist Realism, he deplored the architecture of the Stalinist early

⁵¹ It should be noted that this was not always the case; Soviet architects, for example, were often accused of getting carried away with quotations that were not ideologically motivated, thus succumbing to their personal whimsies. See Khrushchev's critique of Stalinist architecture, examined in Chapter One.

⁵² Adolf Ciborowski, *Warsaw, a City Destroyed and Rebuilt* (Warsaw: Polonia, 1964). In addition to English, the book was also published in French and German.

1950s and its “pseudo-Renaissance attics and columns, pseudo-Baroque sculptures and other architectural decorations typical of long-gone styles.”⁵³ He did, however, find a redeeming quality in these buildings:

When we examine these projects today, after the passage of time, against the background of the further development of Warsaw architecture, we begin to see that – apart from a few glaring misunderstandings – the buildings erected between 1950 and 1955 constitute a sort of architectural bridge between the architecture of old and modern Warsaw. [...] The very gradation of styles adds to the impression that the city has developed over many years, if not ages.⁵⁴

While this Socialist Renaissance did not succeed in bringing forth a new classless society in its construction sites, as it was hoped, it did construct a past for a country that had undergone tremendous devastation and subsequent political turmoil.

What Groys described as the superhistorical operation of the Socialist Renaissance reverberated less conspicuously beyond the Thaw. The restoration campaigns of the major cities and the need to engage with the architectural legacy of the early modern period continued unabated well past the end of Socialist Realism. By early 1955 in Warsaw, the restoration of the Old Town’s main core was complete, and work gradually spread to the district’s fringes and the neighborhood outside the city walls known as the “New Town,” which also dated from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. There, any pretension of historical accuracy was abandoned and many of the same artists that had worked on the MDM Housing district and the Old Town square were given free rein to decorate facades with their own interpretations of Renaissance motifs. This was essentially a return to the subjective, individualistic modes of restoration from the interwar period that Urbanowicz had so deplored in his 1953 article. A 1956 façade by the painter Krystyna Kozłowska on Kościelna street just outside the Old Town walls clearly conveys

⁵³ Ibid., 297.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 304.

that it is a work executed during the 1950s in an early-modern quarter of the town [Fig. 2.34].⁵⁵ The composition is arranged along a grid of discontinuous parallel lines, which appear closer to Mondrian than to a half-timbered façade. Within this framework are three scenes of musicians that make overt references to Renaissance motifs, such as choirs of angels and *putti*. Yet the various birds scattered around the composition are stylized in a way that recalls ceramics from the era, like the ones produced by Picasso. Within the context of the Cold War, the dove had become an emblem of the Eastern bloc (the “peace camp”) and its “fellow travelers” in the West: the peace that it symbolized was the communist alternative to the freedom that the West stood for. Above a doorway in the Old Town of Warsaw, stone doves were added in 1953, as part of the contemporary flourishes that were devised during the restoration, in a subtle nod to the contemporary political reality [Fig. 2.35]. It is thus significant that most birds on Kozłowska’s façade from the New Town are emphatically *not* doves. The one bird that could indeed be one, in the bottom right of the composition, is actually caged in what is perhaps a poignant and cynical commentary that the peace and friendship between the nations came at the cost of personal liberties.

On a corner of the nearby New Town square, a communal house built in late 1955 features a façade designed by Bohdan Urbanowicz [Fig. 2.36]. Two years after lambasting the frivolous restorations of the Old Town, he contradicted his own writings by producing the most idiosyncratic façade of Warsaw’s historic core. Although the building follows the profile and the rhythmical arrangement of openings seen in its early-modern neighbors, it features a thoroughly modernist reinterpretation of a typical old Warsaw façade. The mandatory clock has become a sundial, whose broken spirals and jumbled numbering give it a distinctly avant-garde look [Fig.

⁵⁵ The façade is briefly mentioned in Aleksandr Wojciechowski, “Młoda plastyka polska 1945-1957,” *Przegląd Artystyczny*, 4-5 (July-October 1958): 36

2.37]. To make his artistic allegiances explicit, Urbanowicz added cement copies of some of Constantin Brancusi's most famous works, such as the iconic *Head* and *Torso*.⁵⁶ Yet, this enthusiastic embrace of modern art still had to conform with the preexisting framework of the synthesis of the arts, which Urbanowicz himself had helped develop: the sculptures were placed in permanent niches, albeit streamlined, modernist ones. Ironically, this reversed the logic of Brancusi's works, which often emphasized their autonomy and mobility by carrying their own, portable podiums. Although the façade presages the liberalization of artistic production that would unfold a few months later in Poland with the onset of the Thaw, it also demonstrates the persistence of the synthesis of the arts, as well as the concept's flexibility in adapting to ever-changing political and artistic mandates. This façade is indeed an oddity, but it does convey the difficult balance that artists like Urbanowicz sought, between embracing artistic freedom while resisting the autonomy and mobility of the modernist work, holding on to the principle that art should be tied to specific sociopolitical contexts and thus serve a social purpose, however that might be defined. The question of art's role in society became pressing as de-Stalinization progressed, and it was often the task of critics to attempt to answer it against a rapidly shifting artistic landscape.

Useful and Young Art

In 1955, the prominent Polish art historian and critic Aleksander Wojciechowski (1922-2006) expanded the traditional category of applied art to include all non-autonomous forms of artistic production, which somehow operated in conjunction with some adjacent field of activity, such as craft or architecture, as well as non-artistic fields such as industrial production. These

⁵⁶ Urbanowicz was an ardent admirer of Brancusi. When Brancusi died in 1957, Urbanowicz published an extensive obituary: Bohdan Urbanowicz, "Brancusi," *Przegląd Artystyczny* 4 (July-August 1957): 2-10.

ideas were developed in a collection of essays entitled *On Applied and Useful Art: Collection of Studies and Criticism on the Range of Collaborations between the Polish Visual Arts and Craft, Industry and Architecture in the Years 1944-1954*.⁵⁷ In his introduction, he reflected on the artistic changes of the first postwar decade in Poland, which were

...not only in the new collaborations between art and craft, as well as between architecture and industry, or the new methods of design and construction, the new systems of organization of artistic life, the new achievements in form and content stemming from both contemporary life and the national artistic traditions. These changes also concern the specific social function of art, its momentous role in the various aspects of the life of the people. The art formerly described as “decorative” or “applied” becomes worthy of the name *useful* for the entire society.⁵⁸

The anthology touched upon a great range of topics, such as the decorative arts of the Paris Universal Exposition of 1900, the collaborations between art and industry in interwar Poland, to the development of Polish ceramics, textiles and other applied arts during the early 1950s. A large section of the book was dedicated to the “collaboration between the visual arts and architecture,” what Wojciechowski described as the most discussed artistic issue of his time.⁵⁹ His analysis focused on both the restoration of old monuments in Warsaw, Lublin and Gdańsk, but also on recent projects such as the Socialist-Realist MDM as well as some modernist projects, like the proposal for the “Warszawianka” sports complex in Warsaw (by Jerzy Sołtan, Wojciech Fangor and others, discussed below) [Fig. 2.38] and a monument to the liberation by Xavery Dunikowski.⁶⁰ All these were listed as shining examples of “the great synthesis of the arts,” which thus became a category that united historical restoration and contemporary

⁵⁷ Aleksander Wojciechowski, *O sztuce użytkowej i użytecznej: zbiór studiów i krytyk z zakresu współpracy plastyki polskiej z rzemiosłem, przemysłem i architekturą w latach 1944-1954* (Warsaw: Sztuka, 1955). The book had a considerable circulation: it was issued in 10,000 copies.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 7-8 (emphasis of the author). “Useful art” (*sztuka użyteczna*) is a play on *sztuka użytkowa* (applied art), an alliteration that is difficult to convey in English.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁰ For more on Sołtan and Fangor, see section on the Warsaw Academy of Arts, below. Dunikowski was a sculptor and a survivor of Auschwitz, and produced some of the first works that referred to the Holocaust in the Eastern bloc.

constructions, as well as many disparate styles. This ever-expanding type of art had thus become “useful” within the context of Socialist Poland, making a “great contribution to the strengthening of our economic and cultural potential.”⁶¹

The book was published during the earliest phase of de-Stalinization, when some artists and architects were already testing the waters with modernist forms, yet Socialist-Realism was still officially the norm. Significantly, Wojciechowski continued to push the agenda for “useful” art beyond 1956 and until the end of the decade. In a series of articles published in *Przegląd Artystyczny* (*Art Review*), he continued to adapt his concept in response to the ever-changing political conditions. This chameleonic critical enterprise is a prime example of the difficult balance between continuity and change that defined the culture of the Thaw. A month after the appearance of his book, he wrote an article entitled “Art and Technology,” which discussed *H55*, an exhibition of modernist interior design held in Helsingborg, Sweden that year.⁶² It is not clear from the article whether Wojciechowski visited the exhibition or whether he based his analysis on published material. Still, he appears enthralled by contemporary Scandinavian design, which he interpreted as a significant step towards the democratization of art. For a writer that had been championing the mosaics and stone reliefs of MDM only three years prior, this shift of emphasis to modern design appears like a complete about-face. Yet for Wojciechowski, Scandinavian interiors were true embodiments of “useful art,” and he sought to introduce them to the discussions of art in socialist Poland that he was part of. For this reason, he was quick to underscore the social engagement of the designers, who often produced objects for state housing projects, such as that of Vällingby in the outskirts of Stockholm. He thus implied an affinity

⁶¹ Wojciechowski, *O sztuce użytkowej i użytecznej*, 168.

⁶² Aleskander Wojciechowski, “Sztuka i technika,” *Przegląd Artystyczny* 3-4 (March-April 1955): 84-101.

between Scandinavian social democracy and Eastern European post-Stalinist state socialism, or even suggested that the Scandinavian model could be emulated in Poland.

At the same time, the graphic design of the main Polish journals of art and architecture was undergoing a profound change. The cover of the issue of *Przegląd Artystyczny* in which Wojciechowski's article was published (July-August 1955) featured a detail of a painting by Fernand Léger, depicting a face rendered in the artist's recognizable style [Fig. 2.39]. This was the first Western modern artist to be featured on the journal during the postwar period, a testament to both the loosening of state control on culture and the increasing porosity of the Iron Curtain in the months leading to Khrushchev's Secret Speech. The occasion was the recent death of Léger, for whom Bohdan Urbanowicz wrote a lengthy obituary.⁶³ The French artist was the perfect choice for the journal's embrace of modern art after Socialist Realism: Léger had been a member of the French Communist Party, with close ties to the Soviet Union due to his Russian wife, Nadezhda Khodasevitch, who was also a painter, and also a communist. Léger had visited Poland in 1952 in the context of a group exhibition of contemporary French art that included many of his paintings, organized by the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions at the Zachęta National Art Gallery in Warsaw.⁶⁴ Thus, at the onset of the Thaw, a "Human Face" by Léger aptly displaced portraits of Stalin that had been a staple of *Przegląd Artystyczny*'s cover only a few years prior [Fig. 2.39].

⁶³ Bohdan Urbanowicz, "Fernand Léger," *Przegląd Artystyczny* 3-4 (March-April 1955): 3-23.

⁶⁴ See Karolina Zychowicz, *Paryska lewica w stalinowskiej Warszawie: Wystawa Współczesnej Plastyki Francuskiej w CBWA w 1952 roku* (Warsaw: Zachęta Gallery, 2014). Léger showed his recent paintings of construction workers, which struck a chord in Poland, given the widespread iconography of construction (see the discussion above on the MDM housing district). The exhibition also contained works by other modernist masters, such as Matisse and Picasso (whose politically charged *Massacre en Corée* was also on view), as well as works by the French Socialist Realists, such as André Fougeron and Boris Tasslitzky. Tapestries by Jean Lurçat were also on display, and were received very warmly, given the greater emphasis on the synthesis of the arts and the revival of craft in Poland at the time.

In 1957, Wojciechowski became the editor of the journal, a position that he held until 1961, when many of the cultural liberties gained during the Thaw were rescinded by the Polish authorities. During his tenure, he ardently promoted modern art and architecture and sought to bring the new Polish art of the time (predominantly a variant of *Art Informel*) into dialogue with Western Art.⁶⁵ A new critical term gained prominence at the time: “Young Art” (*młoda plastyka*), which could essentially refer to all art that rejected Socialist Realism and ranged from slightly stylized figuration to full-blown abstraction. When the modifier “young” was added to the title of the 1955 Polish *salon*, it marked the definite break with Stalinist aesthetics, and “youthfulness” (*młodość*) became a point of intense critical discussion. This was a debate about modernism that dared not speak its name.⁶⁶ The term persisted for decades in Poland: Wojciechowski’s survey of Polish painting from the years 1944 to 1974, published in 1983, was entitled *Young Polish Painting (Młode malarstwo polskie)*, subtly suggesting that, despite including the Stalinist years within its chronological range, the survey completely omitted Socialist Realist painting.⁶⁷

Such discussions on “young” art carved out a space for the existence of artworks that could be circulated and displayed in galleries. Yet the principles of synthesis, of an art that was tied to architectural contexts and was thus “useful,” persisted because it had been so ingrained in the critical discourse of the time as a necessary condition for socialist art. If the modifier

⁶⁵ The journal also became affiliated with the local chapter of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), whose chair was also Wojciechowski.

⁶⁶ See Mieczysław Porębski, “Młodość sztuki naszego czasu,” *Przegląd Artystyczny* 1-2 (January-February 1955) 3-33, a survey for Western modern art, interpreted under the prism of “youthfulness.” For more on the landmark National Exhibition of Young Art (*Ogólnopolska Wystawa Młodej Plastyki*), usually referred to as “*Arsenal*,” after the venue it was held in 1955, see Piotr Piotrowski ed., *Odwilż: sztuka ok. 1956 r.* (Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, 1996), 145. The exhibition’s subsequent installment in 1957, held at the Zachęta National Gallery in Warsaw, is often seen as the apogee of Thaw modernism in Poland: *ibid.*, 247.

⁶⁷ Aleksander Wojciechowski, *Młode malarstwo polskie, 1944-1974* (Warsaw: Ossolineum: 1983).

“young” represented the break between pre-1956 and post-1956 art, the synthesis of the arts and other similar terms stood for the continuity of socialist aesthetics across different political systems, with or without a “human face.” The pressing question during the late 1950s was thus how to envision an art that would be both “young” (not Socialist-Realist) and “useful” (fulfilling its social responsibility). One of the options was interior design, as seen in the interest in Scandinavian interiors cited above. Indeed, the period saw a flourishing of Polish design that soon became well known throughout the Eastern bloc.⁶⁸ In the Soviet Union, Poland was seen as the source for advanced industrial design, something that the center of the socialist world often lacked. The Soviet journal *Pol'sha* (Poland) promoted modernist interior design in the early 1960s, and the *Varshava* (Warsaw) hotel in Moscow [Fig. 2.40], opened in 1960, sported one of the most modern interiors in the Soviet Union – a form of “Western” sophistication that still hailed from east of the Iron Curtain.⁶⁹ Many of Poland’s most important artists and architects dabbled in interior design at the time, as seen in the exhibits at the landmark Second All-Polish Exhibition of Interiors, held in 1957 at Zachęta gallery in Warsaw, most prominently Oskar and Zofia Hansen, who also designed the exhibition’s layout [Fig. 2.41].⁷⁰

The other option for a “young” and “useful” art was a new kind of synthesis of the arts that would eschew Stalinist historicism, but also remain faithful to the utopian ideals of

⁶⁸ There has been a recent surge of scholarly interest in postwar Polish design. See Czesława Frejlich and Janusz Antos, *Out of the Ordinary: Polish Designers of the 20th Century* (Warsaw: Adam Mickiewicz Institute, 2011); the recent exhibition of Polish postwar design at the National Museum in Warsaw: Anna Demska, Anna Frąckiewicz and Anna Maga, eds., *We want to be modern: Polish design 1955-1968 from the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw* (Warsaw: Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, 2011); and the scholarly conference that accompanied it, whose proceedings were published as Anna Kielczewska and Maria Porajska-Hałka, eds., *Wizje nowoczesności: lata 50. i 60.: wzornictwo, estetyka, styl życia* (Warsaw: Muzeum Narodowe, 2012).

⁶⁹ See Iurii Gerchuk, writing in 1991, cited in *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, ed. Susan E. Reid and David Crowley (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 2. Gerchuk was former editor of the journal *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo*. On the *Varshava* hotel, see “Hotel ‘Warszawa’ w Moskwie,” *Architektura*, no. 8 (1960): 316.

⁷⁰ Józef Grabowski, ed., *Ogólnopolska wystawa architektury wewnątrz* (Warsaw: Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, 1958).

socialism. In 1956, Wojciechowski discerned such a potential in the project for the Warszawianka stadium in Warsaw, which was produced by an interdisciplinary team consisting of architects Jerzy Sołtan and Zbigniew Ihnatowicz, painter Wojciech Fangor and sculptor Franciszek Strynkiewicz [Fig. 2.38]. In his essay on the project, entitled “So That Architecture Becomes Art Again” (*Aby architektura znów stała się sztuką*), the critic praised the collaborative ethos that generated it, which allowed for formal investigations that would normally lie outside of the purview of architecture.⁷¹ He described the external wall of the swimming pool, which was perforated by irregular biomorphic openings, as “painting in cement,” implying that this new model of synthesis was not about adding art to architecture, but rather abolishing the distinctions between the two altogether.⁷² “The constructor adapts the cement forms to the visions of the painter; the painter forms his ideas while aware of the capabilities of industrial materials; the sculptor works with the mass of the entire project, and not just the decorative details.”⁷³

In this vision of synthesis, the very definitions of art and architecture (and therefore of artists and architects) became unstable. During the second half of the 1950s, the contributors to the Warszawianka project would seek to challenge such disciplinary boundaries, despite each having received traditional training as architects, painters or sculptors. When the first version of the project appeared in 1954, all the members of the creative team were teaching at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. Although the Academy was officially still under the spell of Socialist Realism, such teachers were committed modernists, and thus gravitated to the newly founded

⁷¹ Aleksander Wojciechowski, “Aby architektura znów stała się sztuką,” *Przegląd Artystyczny* 1-2-3 (January-March 1956): 3-10.

⁷² It is significant, in this respect, that the different aspects of the design were not attributed to any of the participating artists and architects; to this day, the precise author of these openings, which are the most striking feature of the design, remains unidentified. Jola Gola, *Jerzy Sołtan: A Monograph* (Warsaw; Cambridge, MA: Muzeum Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie; Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, 1995), 144-45 and 160-67.

⁷³ Wojciechowski, “Aby architektura znów stała się sztuką,” 10.

department of Interior Architecture (*Architektura Wnętrz*), which, by eschewing the traditional categories of architecture, painting and sculpture, was less regulated by the official aesthetic dogma. This maneuver turned the Stalinist synthesis against its head: it fulfilled the calls for closer collaboration between architects and artists, yet invented a field of artistic activity that would allow for more creative freedom by being neither “pure” art nor “pure” architecture, both of which had been thoroughly formalized according to Socialist Realism. The *Warszawianka* project attracted the attention of the Academy’s rector, Marian Wnuk, who allowed Sołtan, Ihnatowicz and others to form the Art and Research Workshops (*Zakłady Artystyczno-Badawcze*). An independent creative association that operated from within the Academy’s department of Interior Architecture, it became a hotbed for experimental practices in Poland until the early 1960s.⁷⁴

Towards an Open Form: Synthesis at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts

The fate of the Art and Research Workshops (ARW) in Warsaw closely followed the course of the Thaw in Poland. They began in 1954, before the watershed events of 1956, reaching the peak of their activity around 1958 and then entered a steady decline in the early 1960s until their formal dissolution in 1968. In a sense, the ARW was the artistic corollary of the aforementioned Warsaw School of philosophy (Kołakowski, Bauman and others), with which it shared the same commitment to renewal from within existing institutional structures, the questioning of official culture by that culture’s own premises, and, sadly, the same fate. Bringing together architects, designers, engineers, artists, and occasionally filmmakers and musicians, the

⁷⁴ Gola, *Jerzy Sołtan: A Monograph*, 144-153. For a detailed account of the activities of the Art and Research Workshops, see the detailed archival history of the Warsaw Academy by Wojciech Włodarczyk, *Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie w latach 1944-2004* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne Spółka Akcyjna; Akademia Sztuk Pięknych, 2005), 234-48.

ARW were a truly interdisciplinary institution that was committed to experimentation and innovation: the very conjoining of art and research in the title points to a “laboratory” approach that harks back to certain avant-gardes of the 1920s, such as Constructivism. Indeed, a notable alumnus of the workshops, the artist Krzysztof Wodiczko (b. 1943), has compared the ARW with the legendary art schools of the interwar period, such as the Bauhaus and the VKhUTEMAS in Moscow.⁷⁵

Most accounts agree that the architect Jerzy Sołtan (1913-2005) was the main driving force behind the ARW. During his studies in Warsaw in the late 1930s, he had developed a fascination with Le Corbusier, with whom he eventually established a correspondence in 1945 while confined in a POW camp in Murnau.⁷⁶ After the liberation, he moved to Paris and began working in Le Corbusier’s studio, where he was involved in many projects, most notably the development of the *Modulor*, for which Sołtan executed the drawings that were published at the time.⁷⁷ In 1948, at the beginning of Poland’s Stalinization, he briefly visited Warsaw and delivered a speech on the synthesis of the arts at the National Museum.⁷⁸ Although the text of the lecture appears to be lost today, it likely relayed Le Corbusier’s ideas published in *Volontés*.⁷⁹ The impact of this lecture is difficult to gauge, since it is sparsely mentioned in the sources of the time. Soon after, the Soviet, Socialist Realist model of synthesis as ornamentation would

⁷⁵ Douglas Crimp, Rosalyn Deutsche, Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, and Krzysztof Wodiczko, “A Conversation with Krzysztof Wodiczko,” *October* 38 (Autumn, 1986): 33-34. Another internationally known alumna of the ARW is the artist Magdalena Abakanowicz.

⁷⁶ At the camp, Sołtan met future collaborators Zbigniew Ihnatowicz, Bohdan Urbanowicz and others. He credits the intellectual milieu of the camp as truly formative for his subsequent career. See Gola, *Jerzy Sołtan: A Monograph*, 98-106.

⁷⁷ See “Modulor: Sistema di misura di Le Corbusier. Note di Jerzy Sołtan,” *Domus* nr. 3 iss. 228 (1948): 3-5.

⁷⁸ The only surviving archival traces of the speech are a few printed invitations to the lecture preserved in the Jerzy Sołtan papers at the archives of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts.

⁷⁹ Le Corbusier, “Vers l’unité,” *Volontés* (December 13, 1944) and “Aux approches d’une synthèse,” *Volontés* (8 August, 1945). See also Introduction, p.

dominate Polish architecture. Sołtan returned permanently to Poland in 1950, at the height of Socialist Realism, to take up a position at the newly founded department of Interior Architecture at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, thus avoiding his alma mater, the school of architecture at the Warsaw Polytechnic. During these years, he concentrated on exhibition design, whose ephemerality helped him avoid the eye of the censors.⁸⁰ This also allowed him to travel abroad to trade fairs, thus enabling him to maintain his contacts with the international architectural community that he had forged during his time in Paris. He had been a member of the UAM (*Union des Artistes Modernes*) since 1946, and since 1947 of CIAM and ASCORAL (*Assemblée de constructeurs pour une rénovation architecturale*), a French group associated with CIAM and founded by Le Corbusier. More importantly, Sołtan became a founding member of Team 10, a group of architects that emerged from the postwar CIAM congresses and sought to revise some of its orthodoxies. He participated in most of its meetings during the 1950s and 1960s, being one of the few Eastern Europeans to remain active in Team 10 until the end of the 1960s.⁸¹

Sołtan occupied then a unique position during the Thaw. Abroad, he was an architect on the forefront of new developments in international architecture; in Poland, he was mostly an artist and a designer, working on many different fields, from furniture and exhibition design to drawing and sculpture, while teaching in an art school. This range of activities was not uncommon for Western architects. What was specific to Sołtan and to others like him from socialist Eastern Europe was that he assumed a different identity when working at home than in the West: while he was strictly an architect in the eyes of his Western colleagues, at home he eschewed the more controlled field of architecture by focusing on activities that allowed him

⁸⁰ Sołtan collaborated with Oskar Hansen (see below) in the National Folk Art Exhibition of 1952, held inside the Palace of Culture, which was still under construction.

⁸¹ The others were Oskar Hansen (Poland), Charles Polonyi (Hungary) and Radovan Nikšić (Yugoslavia). For more on the Eastern European involvement in Team 10, see Łukasz Stanek, ed., *Team 10 East: Revisionist Architecture in Real Existing Modernism* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2014).

more creative freedom, such as art and art instruction.⁸² This could be the reason why Sołtan, unlike his mentor Le Corbusier, did not position architecture in the center of the synthesis of the arts, nor did he see himself as the master builder and main author of the work produced by the ARW. Likely in response to the collectivist ideals that were revived during the reformist 1950s, architects, artists and engineers involved in the projects were equally credited, and, as attested by their accounts, often worked outside of their fields of specialization. In this sense, the ARW was a modernist, experimental version of the idealized construction site depicted in the MDM reliefs and photographs discussed above. The modernist synthesis of the arts that emerged in Poland during the late 1950s was thus more than a transplant of Le Corbusier's ideas, from a center to a periphery; it was rather their fundamental transformation and adaptation for a distinct political context.

Due to many of its members' roots in exhibition design, some of the most important projects produced by the ARW were exhibition pavilions. In 1955, Sołtan and Ihnatowicz, along with engineer Waław Zalewski and painter Julian Pałka designed a "Tropical" exhibition pavilion that would be suitable for trade fairs in warmer climates, and could be easily transported and assembled [Fig. 2.42].⁸³ Consisting of a large, modular roof of steel trusses and a series of large painted panels that served as its walls, the building was conceived as an installation of paintings in space. Rather than a later addition to a preconceived architectural composition, art became the protagonist, and the means by which space was articulated. Architecture was not the "mother of all arts" any more, but the mediator between painting and engineering, between the

⁸² This was arguably the case for many other figures of the generation, such as Oskar Hansen. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, Vjenceslav Richter in Yugoslavia also occupied a similar position between art and architecture, although perhaps for different reasons due to the different political climate of his country.

⁸³ Jola Gola, *Jerzy Sołtan: A Monograph*, 149-151. Many photos and drawings of the pavilion survive in the Sołtan papers, Archives of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.

machine aesthetic of steel elements and the freeform, handmade paintings. The project was adapted and realized later that year at the International Trade Fair in Damascus, when designer Henryk Wiśniewski, engineer Bohdan Koy and sculptor Alina Szapocznikow also joined the team. In that final version, the large paintings were replaced by photomurals of clouds that were suspended in both horizontal and vertical orientations, thus creating a striking effect of weightlessness. Sołtan was particularly proud of the pavilion, which had been very well received by the press both in Poland and abroad, and sent three photos to Le Corbusier in Paris [Fig. 2.43].⁸⁴

The best-known project produced by the ARW was the Polish pavilion for the Brussels World Fair of 1958, which will be discussed at length in Chapter Four [Fig. 4.28-4.35]. The winning entry of a national competition held in 1956, it was eventually shelved by the commissioning authorities in early 1958 due to financial difficulties, not to mention the growing unease of Polish officials with its experimental nature. Soon thereafter, Sołtan was invited to teach at the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD) during the fall term of 1958-59, at the recommendation of Le Corbusier and following the great press reception of the Brussels pavilion design. He spent the next few years between Warsaw and Cambridge, and finally emigrated to the US in 1961, taking up a professorship at the GSD, which he held until his retirement in 1979. Although most of his colleagues from the ARW remained in Poland and continued to teach at the Warsaw Academy, Sołtan's trajectory is similar to that of other Polish intellectuals of his generation, who invested much effort in the reformist culture of their country during the late 1950s and then became disillusioned and emigrated during the 1960s.

⁸⁴ Fondation Le Corbusier, R3-4-550. Also, see its positive mention in an overview of Polish architecture published in *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui*: "Pologne," *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui* 26 (November 1955): 23.

The interdisciplinary culture of the ARW permeated the entire Warsaw Academy as the Thaw progressed, as teachers and students freely moved between mediums and departments. This was closer to the Bauhaus model of art instruction, and a far cry from the strict compartmentalization of disciplines under Socialist Realism, which often followed older, Beaux-Arts academic models and a strict division between the different mediums. At the Warsaw Academy during the second half of the 1950s it was quite common for instructors to change disciplines: the aforementioned Bohdan Urbanowicz, a painter by training, began teaching courses on urbanism and eventually succeeded Sołtan as the chair of the Department of Interior Architecture, where he remained until his retirement in 1980.

The best-known figure to emerge from this milieu is Oskar Hansen (1922-2005), whose career bears many similarities to Sołtan's.⁸⁵ He was also trained as an architect at the Warsaw Polytechnic, and also went to Paris after graduation, where he spent two years (1948-50) on a scholarship apprenticing for Fernand Léger and the architect Pierre Jeanneret, to whom he had been introduced by Sołtan. Much like Sołtan, Hansen returned to Poland in the early 1950s and sought to avoid the dominant Socialist Realism by working on exhibition design.⁸⁶ During his tenure at Jeanneret's studio in Paris, Hansen attended the 1949 CIAM congress in Bergamo, where he presented the residential development at Puteaux in the outskirts of Paris. The synthesis

⁸⁵ A comprehensive monograph on Hansen was published on the occasion of his retrospective at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw in 2005: Oskar Hansen, *Towards Open Form / Ku Formie Otwartej* (Warsaw; Frankfurt: Foksal Gallery Foundation; Revolver, 2005). See also the exhibition's catalogue, Oskar Hansen, *Zobaczyć świat: Struktury wizualne; o wizualnej semantyce: forma zamknięta czy forma otwarta?* (Warsaw: Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki; Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie, 2005). An international conference on Hansen was organized in 2013, on the occasion of his posthumous retrospective at the Museu d'Art Contemporani in Barcelona. For the proceedings, see Aleksandra Kędziorek and Łukasz Ronduda, eds., *Oskar Hansen, Opening Modernism: On Open Form Architecture, Art and Didactics* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2014).

⁸⁶ Hansen has described his engagement with pavilions and exhibition design in general as a laboratory for his ideas, most notably his theory of the Open form, discussed below. See his interview with Joanna Mytkowska, in Hansen, *Towards Open Form*, 132.

of the arts was one of the salient themes of the conference, yet Hansen was very critical of some of the ways it was discussed:

During a discussion on the integration of the arts, Le Corbusier spoke very highly of the renaissance of the French tapestries. I couldn't stand it. [...] I said I found it hard to believe that the guru of the new architecture, a co-creator of purism, could try to humanize it with the use of textiles – commercial products. The whole so-called renaissance of the French tapestries is but a commercial, profit-driven movement that exploits great artists, and its only goal is to *épater les bourgeois*, rather than doing something for the good of architecture. The CIAM architects should oppose that and find proper ways to humanize modern architecture. I obviously spoke very passionately, because no one interrupted me in that iconoclastic attack, there was silence, and when I finished, applause broke out. I looked at Le Corbusier. He was clapping his hands, too.⁸⁷

This was the same session on the relationship between architecture and the visual arts in which Helena Syrkus attacked modern architecture from a Socialist-Realist standpoint. Hansen's lesser known criticism of modernism was voiced from a socialist perspective, but was also distanced from Syrkus' Stalinist position. In his opinion, modernism had betrayed its own roots.⁸⁸ His intervention attracted the attention of the British architect Jacqueline Tyrwhitt, who invited him to a CIAM summer school in London that year, where he won the first prize. This was the

⁸⁷ Oskar Hansen, "Paris, Bergamo, London," unpublished manuscript from the architect's archive, 1999, in *Towards Open Form*, 175. See also the conference proceedings from the Bergamo CIAM, reprinted as *Documents: 7 CIAM, Bergamo, 1949* (Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1979), non-paginated (deuxième commission, compte-rendu de la séance plénière, 7). Hansen is mentioned as "étudiant polonais" in the transcripts, and his comment on tapestries appears abbreviated in comparison to his recollections as he wrote them in the later manuscript. On the "renaissance" of French tapestry in the postwar period, see Romy Golan, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927-1957* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 197-214; On Le Corbusier's engagement with tapestries, *ibid.*, 235-247.

⁸⁸ When Sigfried Giedion wrote about this session in Bergamo in his *Architektur und Gemeinschaft* of 1956 (translated in English as *Architecture, You and Me*), he emphasized Syrkus' intervention. He entitled that of section of his account as "Architects and Politics: An East-West discussion," underlining the Cold-War division between the proponents of modernism that dominated CIAM and the supporters of Socialist Realism like Syrkus, as well as the few architects who agreed with her, such as the Swiss Hans Schmidt. It is interesting that Giedion entirely omitted Hansen from his account, who was more difficult to place along the Cold War divide, as a Pole who worked in France, yet was critical of many aspects of postwar modernism. See Sigfried Giedion, *Architecture, You and Me: The Diary of a Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 79-90.

beginning of Hansen's involvement in CIAM and the international architectural community, which continued with his participation in many subsequent meetings of CIAM and Team 10.⁸⁹

A decade later, the 1959 CIAM conference in Otterlo would be a watershed in Hansen's career: it was there that he first articulated outside of Poland his theory of the "Open Form," which would define his career for decades, as well as his legacy.⁹⁰ Widely cited today in studies of postwar Polish art and architecture, the theory of Open Form should be viewed in conjunction with the interdisciplinary environment of the Warsaw Academy from which it emerged, as it sought to simultaneously address both art and architecture under a unified aesthetic theory. Hansen's speech, entitled "The Open Form in Architecture: The Art of the Great Number," began as a critique of modernist solutions to the postwar housing crisis.⁹¹ For Hansen, the standardization of architecture and the construction of housing based on plans predetermined by architects without the participation of the communities involved had failed: it could not fulfill the needs of individuals, who were thus reduced by the designers to generic inhabitants. This kind of architecture was an embodiment of what Hansen called Closed Form, which "does not accept any changes in the mode of life, and thus becomes obsolete before it is even realized."⁹² The

⁸⁹ Gradually, Hansen stopped travelling to these meetings during the mid-1960s, but still retained correspondence with some members, such as Yona Friedman, to whose exhibition *L'architecture Mobile* he contributed in 1961. See Kari Rittenbach, "Taking Shape: Reconsidering Oskar Hansen's Open Form," MA Thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, 2010, 9.

⁹⁰ See Oscar Newman, *New Frontiers in Modern Architecture: CIAM '59 in Otterlo* (New York: Universe Books, 1961), 190-196. The speech was initially delivered in French.

⁹¹ In Hansen's often esoteric terminology, the "Great number" refers to the problems of scale facing modern architecture: a mass of people that can still be individualized.

⁹² The binary of open and closed form in Hansen's thought bears some similarities to that articulated by Heinrich Wölfflin in 1915 in his seminal *Grundbegriffe der Kunstgeschichte*, although Hansen, unlike Wölfflin, attaches a value judgment to the designations "open" and "closed." It is difficult to determine whether Hansen was influenced by Wölfflin, since he never referred to him explicitly. The *Grundbegriffe* was only translated in Polish in 1962, a few years after Hansen's talk, but his ideas had already permeated Polish art history. See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Podstawowe pojęcia historii sztuki: problem rozwoju stylu w sztuce nowożytnej*, trans. Danuta Hanulanka (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy imienia Ossolińskich, 1962). Still, Hansen could have read Wölfflin in another language, such as French, in which an edition of *Grundbegriffe* existed since 1952.

Closed Form was so ingrained in architectural culture, he argued that it had become inescapable, and its “inhuman” designs proliferated everywhere during the postwar period. Although he spoke positively about projects such as Le Corbusier’s Unité de Habitation in Marseille, he deemed them too small, incapable of addressing the needs of the “great number.” Conversely, recent large-scale developments like Brasilia were condemned as disrespectful of the individuals that would inhabit them, and were listed as prime examples of the Closed Form that ought to be avoided.

Hansen counter-proposed an aesthetics of the Open Form, which should “aid the individual in finding himself in the collective, to make him indispensable in the creation of his own surroundings.” In a sense, Hansen translated in aesthetic terms the efforts of Marxist Humanism to find a balance between the individual and the collective.⁹³ When seen in the context of the discussions on the synthesis of the arts in Hansen’s milieu in Warsaw, the theory of the Open Form reflects the general questioning of architecture’s primacy in the organization of collaborative artistic activity. Hansen invited architects to refrain from predetermining all aspects of the built environment, and instead to allow the inhabitants to actively participate in its shaping: “an all-knowing architect must realize that he does not know everything himself. The architect superspecialist is obsolescent in present times.” Thus, Hansen’s Open Form was a radical reframing of the new theories of synthesis of the arts that developed during the Polish Thaw, one that expanded the discourse of collaboration between architects and artists into one between architects and the totality of society.

⁹³ For an interpretation of Open Form against the Marxist-Humanist intellectual context of the time in Poland, see Joan Ockman, “Oskar Hansen’s Radical Humanism: Open Form Against a Cold War Background,” in *Oskar Hansen, Opening Modernism: On Open Form Architecture, Art and Didactics*, ed. Aleksandra Kędziorek and Łukasz Ronduda (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2014). 29-60.

Hansen published his theory in Poland a few months prior to the CIAM congress in the weekly broadsheet *Przegląd Kulturalny*.⁹⁴ It was accompanied by an image of Hansen's Polish pavilion for the 1955 International Trade Fair in Izmir, a light structure consisting of modular paraboloid tents that he later credited as the initial inspiration for his theory [Fig. 2.44-2.45].⁹⁵ While he spoke strictly as an architect at CIAM, in the Polish version he had sought to address the totality of artistic creation. Instead of architecture, Hansen focused on "visual activity" (*działanie plastyczne*) in general, which encompassed examples from both art and architecture, such as contemporary sculpture and the *Interbau* architectural exhibition in Berlin. The shift between these two perspectives is significant: Hansen operated as an architect in the Western context, yet in Poland he was more of an interdisciplinary artists-architect, in accordance with greater atmosphere of the Warsaw Academy during the Thaw. Although he does not directly engage with it, his theory of the Open Form developed against the background of the synthesis of the arts in post-Stalinist Poland, which is evident by both his questioning of architecture's primacy and by his desire to address all mediums simultaneously. More importantly, Hansen's theory continued the tendency to employ poetics as a way of addressing politics, something which we have already seen at the 1954 conference on the synthesis of the arts in Moscow. In *Przegląd Kulturalny*, Hansen deplored works of art and architecture that were "personal monuments to their authors," and criticized strict authorial control that could not account for

⁹⁴ Oskar Hansen, "Forma Otwarta," *Przegląd Kulturalny* vol. 5 no. 335 (29 January 1959): 5. The text was translated into English in Oskar Hansen, *Towards Open Form*, 199. *Przegląd Kulturalny* was founded in 1952 as the official organ of the State's Council of Art and Culture and covered a wide variety of topics, from the visual and performing arts to literature and philosophy. During the Thaw, it became a prime platform for the exchange of new ideas and was engaged in the promotion of experimental and avant-garde practices, in addition to disseminating the new theories of Kołakowski and others to a wide audience. It ceased circulation in 1963.

⁹⁵ On the Izmir Pavilion, see Oskar Hansen, *Towards an Open Form*, 137. The Izmir design was further developed in Hansen's pavilion for the Sao Paulo fair of 1959, which further emphasized the ephemerality of the structure, by focusing on the paraboloid tent and doing away with vertical walls altogether. *Ibid.*, 134 and 197.

changes, accidents and audience agency: a critique of authoritarianism delivered in artistic terms. For him, such works were examples of Closed Form: “decisions that someone else makes instead of us.” Open form, on the other hand, allows the audience to participate in the formation of the work, to become “organic elements of the art, [...] to walk inside it, rather than around it. [...] Compared to closed composition, which is based on the masterly execution of the object, the convention of open composition will be based on ‘passe-partout’ action, displaying the changes occurring in space. It will be the art of events.”

Although it operated as a critique of modernist housing in Otterlo, in Poland the Open Form became a blueprint for performances (“the art of events”), environments and other post-medium artistic practices during the 1960s and 1970s. Hansen never quite gave up architecture, and even attempted to apply his theories in the building of housing estates such as the one in Rakowiec, Warsaw (1961) — somewhat unsuccessfully, as he himself admitted, due to material and administrative constraints.⁹⁶ Yet it was in his activities as a teacher in the Academy’s sculpture department from 1955 until his retirement in 1981 that the Open Form found its fullest expression, as it became the guiding principle for conceptual artists active in the 1970s that studied with Hansen, such Grzegorz Kowalski, Zofia Kulik and others. Finally, the Open Form still exerts a powerful influence on the younger generation of Polish artists such as Artur Żmijewski, Paweł Althamer and Katarzyna Kozyra, who studied at the Warsaw Academy under Kowalski, following a curriculum based on Hansen’s ideas.⁹⁷ It is perhaps in the participatory works of such artists, who establish a set of conditions that their participants can inhabit, yet

⁹⁶ Ibid., 86-101.

⁹⁷ Adam Szymczyk, “From Kowalski's Studio Into the World: Katarzyna Kozyro, Paweł Althamer, Artur Żmijewski,” *Art Margins [Online]*, 26 August 2000, <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/420-from-kowalskis-studio-into-the-world-katarzyna-kozyro-pawel-althamer-artur-zmijewski> (accessed May 10, 2015).

refrain from predetermining the final outcomes, that the Open Form found its fullest expression.⁹⁸

Hansen was first rediscovered outside of Poland around the time of his death in 2005, not by architectural history that had ignored him for decades, but by contemporary art criticism that discovered him through prominent Polish artists such as Althamer and Żmijewski, who often cited him as a significant influence.⁹⁹ They also contributed to Hansen's 2004 retrospective in Warsaw by helping reconstruct Hansen's first solo exhibition, held in 1957 inside the foyer of the Jewish Theater in Warsaw.¹⁰⁰ It showcased many of the modernist paintings and sculptures that Hansen had executed privately under Socialist Realism, as well as some recent photographs and architectural drawings and models.¹⁰¹ Enmeshed in the concurrent discussions on the relationship of traditional artistic mediums to architecture and to society at large, as well as with innovative exhibition design, Hansen sought to trouble the conventional modes of viewership inside the gallery. He constructed a modular metal framework that he dubbed a "choke chain" (*kolczatka*), which surrounded the works like an irregular scaffolding [Fig. 2.46-2.47]. While it provided support, allowing some works to be suspended in mid-air, it also offered unusual viewing angles to the viewers, who were invited to navigate this complex web. Parts of this metal structure were also installed on the street outside the gallery, thus joining the gallery space with the public space outside it. More than a display of individual artworks, this was a contribution to the ongoing conversation on art's place in contemporary Polish society that was

⁹⁸ For more on the participatory work of Althamer and Żmijewski, see Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London; New York: Verso Books, 2012), 255-60.

⁹⁹ See Hansen's interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist in *Domus* 868 (March 2004): 102-103, reprinted in *Towards an Open Form*, 205.

¹⁰⁰ Hansen, *Towards Open Form*, 139.

¹⁰¹ The exhibition was part of the salon of the *Po Prostu* magazine, a student's publication that, like *Przegląd Kulturalny*, was an emblem of the new culture of the Thaw. The Jewish Theater in Warsaw was another important hub of avant-garde activity at the time. See *Towards an Open Form*, 189.

led by critics such as Wojciechowski. Hansen eschewed both options that were available at the time: his works were neither purely “bourgeois” gallery objects offered for contemplation nor did they partake in a permanent synthesis of the arts within a fixed architectural framework. Instead, they occupied the space between the two, precariously floating between the gallery walls and the public space, much like Hansen’s own practice that operated on the interstice between art and architecture.

The final result was something that was neither art nor architecture. In that sense, it superseded the synthesis of the arts by negating its core premise, the fundamental separation between art and architecture. In 1976 Aleksander Wojciechowski, who had wrote an enthusiastic review of the exhibition right after it opened, retrospectively described Hansen’s “choke chain” as one of the first examples of an “environment” in Poland, and therefore as a pivotal moment in the development of contemporary Polish art.¹⁰² The critic who had began his career by championing the mosaics of the Socialist-Realist synthesis in the early 1950s realized, at the end of the decade, that works such as Hansen’s had brought about a breakdown of not just the traditional models of the synthesis of the arts, but also of medium specificity. In one of his essays from 1959, he argued that the synthesis of the arts was transformed into an “integration of art” (*integracja sztuki*), an increasing commingling of mediums: “Sometimes film operates with painterly images. At times painting strives for filmic effects. Color in architecture serves as a “painting” of the cityscape.”¹⁰³

¹⁰² Aleksandr Wojciechowski, “Environment in Polish Art,” *Projekt* 112 (March 1976): 17-32. See also his review of Hansen’s “choke chain”: Aleksander Wojciechowski, “Sztuka przestrzeni, czasu, emocji,” *Przegląd Artystyczny* 4 (July-August 1957): 27-37. For more on the 1976 article on environments and Wojciechowski’s trajectory from champion of synthesis in the 1950s to an advocate for environments and other immersive art forms in the 1970s, see the conclusion.

¹⁰³ Aleksander Wojciechowski, “Sztuka zaangażowana,” *Przegląd Artystyczny* 1 (January-March 1959): 3-5.

Figures such as Hansen and, to some extent, Sołtan, contributed to such developments, away from a synthesis of strictly delimited art and architecture and towards what would later be termed the “post-medium” condition. It has often been noted that Hansen’s theory of the Open Form and his oeuvre in general should be examined within the context of socialist Poland.¹⁰⁴ His emphasis on the role of the individual within the collective was a central theme in the revisionist Polish Marxist Humanism, while his focus on large-scale development, which reached its apex during the 1960s when he proposed the model of Linear Continuous System in urbanism, could not operate outside of a centralized state like the People’s Republic.¹⁰⁵ Yet what has not been recognized is that his practice emerged from intense debates about the synthesis of the arts in the first years after Stalin’s death. From his vocal reaction to the lofty discourse on synthesis that he encountered in Bergamo in 1949, to his focus on exhibition design as a way of combining art and architecture in ways that lay outside of the Socialist-Realist model of the synthesis of the arts, Hansen’s career was shaped by the issues discussed in the chapter. In Otterlo, Hansen addressed his speech to the “artist-architect,” whose role should change from one of mastery and authorship to one of conceptualization and coordination. This is precisely the position that he occupied until his death in 2005.

Hansen’s last work was a project for the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw entitled *Dream of Warsaw (Sen Warszawy)* [Fig. 2.48].¹⁰⁶ It consisted of a miniature skyscraper that could be illuminated at night, made of a thin sheet of metal and fixed on a branch of a tree just outside of the gallery’s main ribbon window, which offers a direct frontal view of the Palace of Culture.

¹⁰⁴ See Aleksandra Kędziołek and Łukasz Ronduda, eds., *Oskar Hansen, Opening Modernism: On Open Form Architecture, Art and Didactics* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2014).

¹⁰⁵ Łukasz Stanek, “Oskar and Zofia Hansen: Me, You, Us and the State,” in *Team 10 East: Revisionist Architecture in Real Existing Modernism*, ed. Łukasz Stanek (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2014): 211-42.

¹⁰⁶ Hansen, *Towards Open Form*, 238. The project was documented by Artur Żmijewski, who made a film with the same title.

Seen from inside the gallery, it appeared like a new, futuristic skyscraper, which confronted the Stalinist landmark by almost matching it in height, and by countering its pyramidal composition with a simple vertical tower topped with a protruding observation deck. At the time, planners in Warsaw were still struggling with the architectural heritage of the People's Republic: the area around the Palace was being redeveloped as the city's new business center, with glistening glass skyscrapers erected to house the corporations of the new free-market economy. This was a conscious effort to surround the Palace and thus tame its symbolic force, to turn it into yet another office building. In this context, Hansen's gesture was a playful addition to the Warsaw skyline, which was once more being contested. It also was the one and only reference to Socialist Realism in an oeuvre that almost spanned six decades, a dogma in the shadow of which his career took shape. Most importantly, *Dream of Warsaw* was, like the "choke chain" of 1957 neither art nor architecture: it physically stood between the two, suspended between the Palace and the gallery, addressing both while lying safely outside them. This was perhaps a last, terse comment on the long discussions about combining art and architecture as a way of transforming Polish society, which itself had reached its apex when the Palace was erected, fifty years prior.

CHAPTER 3: YUGOSLAVIA

Synthesis as the Telos of Modernism: The First Didactic Exhibition of Abstract Art

On March 27th 1957, the “First Didactic Exhibition of Abstract Art” opened at the Municipal Gallery of Contemporary art in Zagreb [Fig. 3.1].¹ Instead of showcasing original works of art, it consisted of ninety-two cardboard panels, each 70 x 50 cm, with typewritten texts, photographs and clippings from books and magazines pasted onto them [Fig. 3.2-3.4].² Like enlarged pages of an ad-hoc textbook on the history of modern art, the panels narrated the development of abstraction, from its roots in neo-impressionism to its recent manifestations in the 1950s. The exhibition’s format ensured its portability: after closing a month later on April 30th, the panels were packed into four purpose-built plywood cases [Fig. 3.5] and were circulated throughout Yugoslavia, recreating the exhibition a total of eleven times until 1963.³ Its title clearly stated the organizers’ intention to educate their fellow citizens in order to form a future public for abstract art: rather than offering them an opportunity for aesthetic contemplation, they sought to prepare them for contemplations to come. Most importantly, this was labeled as the

¹ Founded in 1954, it was one of the earliest exhibition spaces dedicated to contemporary art in Eastern Europe. The gallery became the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb in 1980, which eventually moved to its current location in New Zagreb in 2009.

² The panels have been preserved and are currently held in the archives of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. They were recently exhibited again in the 2012 exhibition *Socialism and Modernity*. See Ljiljana Kolečnik, “Conflicting Visions of Modernity and the Post-war Modern Art,” in *Socialism and Modernity: Art, Culture, Politics: 1950-1974*, ed. Ljiljana Kolečnik (Zagreb: Museum of Contemporary Art; Institute of Art History, 2012), 116-19. For a contemporary reappraisal of the exhibition, see the essay by the Croatian artists’ collective What, How, and for Whom, “Didactic Exhibition on Abstract Art,” in *Political Practices of (post-) Yugoslav Art: RETROSPECTIVE 01*, ed. Jelena Vesić and Prelom Kolektiv (Belgrade: Museum of 25th of May, 2010): 64-79.

³ The exhibition travelled in the following venues: House of the Army in Sisak (December 1957), Museum of Applied Arts in Belgrade (January 1958), the Council for Education and Culture in Skopje (March 1958), Youth Tribune in Novi Sad (May 1958), the City Museum in Bečej (June 1958), the museum in Karlovac (April 1959), Art Gallery in Maribor (June 1959), the Museum of Srem in Sremska Mitrovica (February 1960), the Art Gallery of Osijek (April 1960), the Youth Club in Zagreb (December 1961) and the Municipal Museum Bjelovar (February – March 1962).

first such exhibition, indicating the intention to develop a series and thus establish a new institution in the artistic life of the young country. Despite the fact that a sequel never materialized, many agree today that its impact was significant, and that it was probably the most widely attended art event at the time in Yugoslavia.⁴

The exhibition's sequence began with an image that is iconic today: Alfred Barr's diagram, initially published in 1936 on the cover of his *Cubism and Abstract Art*, this time translated into Serbo-Croatian and rendered in updated typesetting [Fig. 3.6]. Arranged along a network of arrows, artists and art movements formed a complex genealogy of modern art. Despite the proliferation of different positions in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the chart eventually allowed for only two possible directions around the year 1935: geometrical abstraction and non-geometrical abstraction. Barr's diagram suggested a historical inevitability for abstraction, at a time when abstract art was challenged by various returns to figuration, as well as the rise of anti-modernist currents that Clement Greenberg would soon label as "kitsch" in his famous 1939 essay.⁵ Rather than a historical study of modern art's evolution, it was more of a teleology, a visual argument in favor of abstraction.

The organizers of the 1957 exhibition, led by the art historian and critic Josip Depolo, endorsed Barr's proposition, and sought to extend his teleology to their contemporary moment of the late 1950s.⁶ To a great extent, the pre-1945 portion of the exhibition constituted an illustration of Barr's diagram and retold the story of modern art as it had already solidified in Western historiography. It began with Neo-Impressionism, Van Gogh and Cézanne and

⁴ Kolečnik, *ibid.*, 126.

⁵ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* vol. 6 no. 5 (Fall 1939): 34-49; reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (new edition) ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003): 539-49.

⁶ Other members of the team, listed on the first panel, were painter and designer Ivan Picelj, critics Radoslav Putar and Tihana Ravelić, architects Vjenceslav Richter and Neven Šegvić, painter Edo Kovačević and the Gallery's manager Vesna Barbić.

proceeded through Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism, Constructivism, Dadaism (sic), Surrealism, De Stijl, and Bauhaus, reproducing many key works along with brief descriptions and analyses of each movement. Modern architecture featured prominently within the narrative, with eight panels dedicated to the pre-1945 work of Mies, Le Corbusier and Gropius. In Barr's diagram, modern architecture was a terminal node, with Purism, De Stijl and Bauhaus, as well as the "machine aesthetic" all leading to it around year 1925, yet with no vectors growing out of it towards the 1930s. In this view, modern architecture reached its *telos* around 1925, whereas abstract art was to continue its growth.

Yet while all this relied heavily on Barr, the sources for the post-1945 portion of the Yugoslav exhibition were distinctly European. Panel 77 featured a small reproduction of a drip painting by Jackson Pollock next to a significantly larger reproduction of a canvas by the French *informel* painter Georges Mathieu. The emphasis on Mathieu and his grouping together with Pollock under the term *tâchisme* belies an influence of French art criticism of the time, specifically the writings of Michel Tapié.⁷ His critical enterprise at the time constituted an obvious yet unavowed effort to challenge the hegemony of American painting by comparing it to French *informel*, in a manner very similar to the way postwar gestural abstraction was presented in the 1957 Didactic exhibition.⁸ The adoption of such a distinctly Western European perspective by the Yugoslav organizers was not for lack of exposure to postwar American art: in 1956, key Abstract-Expressionist works from the Museum of Modern Art were shown in Belgrade in an

⁷ See Michel Tapié, *Un art autre: où il s'agit de nouveaux dévidages du réel* (Paris: Gabriel-Giraud et fils, 1952); excerpted in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, 629-631.

⁸ For the relationship between American Abstract Expressionism and French *informel*, see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) and Serge Guilbaut and Manuel J. Borja-Villel, eds., *Be-Bomb: The Transatlantic War of Images and All That Jazz, 1946-1956* (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2007).

exhibition sponsored by the United States Information Agency.⁹ Rather, it was due to the orientation of the Yugoslav art scene towards Paris, which had been constant since the prewar period.¹⁰ During the period examined here, Paris was still viewed as the epicenter of modern art, as was the case in many other European countries. Indeed, Pollock and Alexander Calder were the only Americans featured in the panels on the postwar period; all others were Europeans with strong ties to Paris: Hans Hartung, Jean Bazaine, Nicolas de Staël, Max Bill, Nicolas Schöffer and others. Each was featured on a single panel, arranged along two categories: geometric and non-geometric art, thus suggesting the fulfillment of Barr's 1935 prophecy for the future development of abstraction along those two lines.

The last section of the exhibition, which touched upon developments of the last few years, shifted focus to the the synthesis of the arts. It opened with an image of Antoine Pevsner's abstract sculpture entitled *Flight of a Bird* in front of Eero Saarinen's General Motors Technical Center in Detroit, which was inaugurated in 1956 [Fig. 3.7]. On a second panel, underneath another image of the same building, an unsigned two-page text entitled "Art Movements and the Synthesis of the Arts" posited that synthesis was at the heart of most contemporary discussions on modern art, followed by a compendium of citations by Sigfried Giedion, Le Corbusier and Aldo Van Eyck, as well as excerpts from the proceedings of the CIAM congresses in

⁹ See the exhibition's catalogue, *Savremena umetnost u SAD iz zbirki Museum of Modern Art, New York* (Belgrade: 1956). On the exhibitions organized by USIS during the Cold War, see Jack Masey and Conway Lloyd Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations: US Exhibitions and Their Role in the Cultural Cold War* (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller, 2008).

¹⁰ See Ljiljana Kolečnik, *Između Istoka i Zapada: hrvatska umjetnost i likovna kritika 50-ih godina* (Zagreb: Institut za Povijest Umjetnosti, 2006). For examples of Croatian art criticism of the 1950s translated into English, see Ljiljana Kolečnik, ed., *Croatian art criticism in the 1950's: selected essays* (Zagreb: Društvo povjesničara umjetnosti Hrvatske, 1999).

Bridgewater (1947), Bergamo (1949) and Aix-en-Provence (1953).¹¹ All were advocating for the collaboration between artists and architects, and most focused on art's potential for tempering the rationalism of modern architecture. This exposé on synthesis continued with examples reproduced in the French press, most notably journals such as *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui* and *Art d'aujourd'hui*.¹² It included the general memorial hospital in Saint-Lô in Normandy, whose initial plan for polychromy was viewed as exemplary [Fig. 3.8].¹³ Panel 90 featured the Mame printing factory in Tours, which featured an extensive program of abstract murals by Edgard Pillet [Fig. 3.9]. One of these murals was rephotographed from the press, and pasted above a pamphlet with Pillet's statement on the role of polychromy in contemporary factories.¹⁴

The culmination of this sequence on the synthesis of the arts and of the exhibition as a whole was the University City (*Ciudad Universitaria*) in Caracas, often hailed during the 1950s as the pinnacle of synthesis [Fig. 3.10].¹⁵ Designed by Carlos Raúl Villanueva from 1940 onwards, the campus featured more than a hundred works, mostly abstract, by Venezuelan artists such as Alejandro Otero and Jesús Rafael Soto, as well as by many prominent foreigners such

¹¹ Le Corbusier's citation was from one of the articles he wrote in *Volontés* in 1948, discussed in the Introduction. Giedion's was from his *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948). The other quotes were not fully attributed.

¹² Both journals were edited by André Bloc and were instrumental in the circulation of the discourse on the synthesis of the arts in both France and abroad. See Nicola Pezolet, *Spectacles Plastiques: Reconstruction and the Debates on the "Synthesis of the Arts" in France, 1944-1962* (Doctoral Dissertation, MIT, 2013), 127-200. On *Art d'aujourd'hui*, see Corine Girieud Ghiyati, *La revue Art d'aujourd'hui: une vision sociale de l'art* (Doctoral Dissertation, Paris-IV - Centre André Chastel, 2011), <http://bibliothequekandinsky.centrepompidou.fr/imagesbk/THESES/THESENUM1.pdf>. (accessed June 10 2015).

¹³ Panel 89. The hospital was designed by a team lead by the American architect Paul Nelson, then active in France. It also included a monumental mosaic by Fernand Leger, which was not reproduced in the exhibition. The Mame factory was designed by Bernard Louis Zehrfuss and Jean Drieu La Rochelle. It featured large abstract polychrome murals in its interior by Edgard Pillet.

¹⁴ A copy of the pamphlet exists in the Paul Damaz papers at the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art in Washington. See Pezolet, *Spectacles Plastiques*, 182.

¹⁵ See "Synthèse des arts: une expérience valable à la cité universitaire de Caracas," *Art d'aujourd'hui* 52 (December 1952): ix; for the reception of the Ciudad Universitaria in France, see Romy Golan, *Muralnomad*, 197-200.

Fernand Léger, Jean Arp, Antoine Pevsner, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Victor Vasarely and Alexander Calder. The latter created the most iconic work of the campus, a series of biomorphic acoustic absorbers suspended from the ceiling of the Aula Magna, variably known as “Flying Saucers” or “Clouds.” The images from Caracas were accompanied by a text on the contemporary efforts at realizing the synthesis of the arts on a large scale, which mostly focused on the activities of the French Groupe Espace.¹⁶ Particular emphasis was placed on the different nationalities of the members of the group, as well as on its international network, suggesting that the Yugoslav didactic exhibition should be seen in conjunction with similar activities elsewhere. As a coda to the exhibition, a total of ten silkscreen prints by Bloc, Pillet and Vasarely, all founding members of Groupe Espace, were also shown [Fig 3.11].¹⁷ These were the only real “works” in the exhibition, following on from the didactic portion like a final exam at the end of a crash course on abstract art. After being educated in appreciating abstraction, the public was invited to apply these skills while contemplating abstract works that fit Barr’s geometric and non-geometric categories. Significantly, these prints had less in common with the art championed by Barr at the time, and more with that produced and supported by the exhibition’s organizers in Yugoslavia.¹⁸ The pamphlet that accompanied the exhibition reproduced many of the texts and images from the panels, and thus became a take-away manual on modern art at a time when few such books existed in Serbo-Croatian.¹⁹

¹⁶ See Introduction.

¹⁷ Some prints were part of the collection of Zagreb’s municipal gallery, whereas others were owned by some of the organizers, such as Depolo. Pillet’s print was also featured on the poster for the exhibition.

¹⁸ It is important, in that respect, that all three artists were associated with the Denise René gallery in Paris, a key venue for the promotion of geometric abstraction in postwar France. Yugoslav abstract painters such as Aleksandar Srnec and Ivan Picelj (one of the organizers of the didactic exhibition) also showed at the gallery.

¹⁹ The pamphlet also includes a short bibliography. It lists a few French authors, such as Michel Seuphor and Jean Bazaine and quite some Americans, such as Alfred Barr, John Rewald, James Johnson Sweeney and others. Significant for the context of the discussion here are the writings of Kandinsky, Malevich and

At first glance, the exhibition appears to transplant art history and criticism from the Western centers to the periphery of Socialist Yugoslavia; yet, a closer reading reveals the transformation of such Western narratives through their admixture. The French discourse on synthesis, which, as Romy Golan has noted, partly developed in response to the postwar hegemony of American large-scale painting, was thus conjoined with Barr's evolutionary model of abstract art that helped sustain this hegemony.²⁰ The synthesis of the arts was posited as the ultimate *telos* of modernism, the fulfillment of the long trajectory that culminated neither in Paris nor in New York, but in Caracas: the capital of a peripheral, fastly growing country, not unlike postwar Yugoslavia. This new teleology performed subtle yet crucial revisions to the Western histories of early-twentieth century abstraction. Interwar movements that operated across mediums and often sought to synthesize them, such as De Stijl, Bauhaus and Constructivism were privileged over those that centered around the production of autonomous paintings or sculptures, such as Cubism. As a result, Soviet Constructivism spanned ten panels, as opposed to Cubism's mere five, a sharp contrast to the relative spaces that the two movements occupied in the Western art-historical narratives of the early postwar period. Significantly, the Yugoslav exhibition included examples such as Tatlin's counter-reliefs and the 1921 Constructivist exhibition at the OBMOKhU (Society of Young Artists), which, although canonical today, were

Lissitzky, cited from German translations published in the late 1920s and 1930s. In addition, Paul Damaz's *Art in European Architecture – Synthèse des arts* (1956) was also cited. The only Yugoslav author cited was Oto Bihalji-Merin, a prolific critic who was already active in the interwar period, and retained close contact with many figures of the European avant-garde. One of the first comprehensive surveys of modern art to appear in the postwar period in Serbo-Croatian was Michel Seuphor's *L'Art abstrait, ses origines, ses premiers maîtres* (Paris: Maeght, 1949), which was translated by Radoslav Putar in 1959 and published by Mladost in Zagreb.

²⁰ Romy Golan, "L'éternel décoratif: French Art in the 1950s," *Yale French Studies* 98: *The French Fifties* (2000): 98-118; See also Golan, *Muralnomad*, 181-213.

far from common in the art histories of the time, in which Constructivism was mostly represented by figures such as Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo.²¹

This strong emphasis on the Soviet avant-garde is exceptional within Eastern Europe at the time, and is revealing of Yugoslavia's unique geopolitical position. As previously mentioned, Yugoslavia developed its own brand of state socialism following the Second World War, independently from Stalin's Soviet Union. This process culminated in the Tito-Stalin split of 1948, after which Tito and Yugoslavia were vilified in the Eastern bloc as a dangerous deviation. "Titoism" was one of the recurring accusations that led to the show trials of Stalin's postwar purges.²² This meant that, unlike Soviet satellites like Poland, Yugoslavia largely evaded Stalinization, all the while adhering to the fundamental principles of Marxism-Leninism and the October Revolution. When the de-Stalinization of 1956 began seeking a "Communism with a Human face," Yugoslavia appeared to have been on the path towards it all along since 1948. In a sense, it was always already "reformed." It is thus no coincidence that Khrushchev sought a reconciliation with Tito as early as in 1955, and the speech he delivered at Belgrade airport soon after his arrival on his first official visit is considered a pivotal moment of the Thaw.

It was out of this unique set of political conditions that postwar Yugoslav art and architecture emerged. Although Socialist Realism did exist in the country, it was often limited in scope and never became the officially sanctioned – let alone enforced – aesthetic dogma of the country.²³ Unlike the situation in other Eastern European countries, contacts with the West were

²¹ See Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 1-6 and 225-238; Hal Foster, "Some Uses and Abuses of Russian Constructivism," in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932*, eds. Richard Adams and Milena Kalinovska (New York: Rizzoli, 1990): 241-53.

²² This was the case at the show trials of Traicho Kostov in Bulgaria, László Rajk in Hungary and others.

²³ The status of Socialist Realism in Yugoslavia thus approximated that in certain Western countries with strong Communist parties in the early 1950s, such as Italy and France. For the latter, see Sarah Wilson, *Picasso/Marx and Socialist Realism in France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

not as limited during the late 1940s and early 1950s, and artistic exchange with the rest of Europe was more feasible. All this resulted in a distinctly modernist orientation, which intensified towards the mid-1950s and culminated in the didactic exhibition of 1957. Therefore, the established art historical narrative of the early Cold War, which pits abstraction against figuration as the aesthetic corollary of the antagonism between the two superpowers and their respective camps, cannot account for such a third position. Yugoslav “socialist modernism” was clearly inscribed in the utopian politics of the country, and began much earlier than its onset in USSR and its satellites in 1956. Already since the late 1940s, artists and critics in Yugoslavia sought to reconcile a type of abstraction that was formally similar to that practiced in the West with the revolutionary politics of their new country. For inspiration and legitimation, these efforts were often oriented towards the origins of art under state socialism: the Soviet Constructivism and Productivism of the 1920s, which became key reference points during the 1950s in Yugoslavia.

As in USSR and Poland, the synthesis of the arts became the main way for articulating the relationship between art and politics in postwar Yugoslavia. Yet this was a distinct, thoroughly modernist form of synthesis that, unfettered from the Stalinist model, stood between the contemporary Western positions of Le Corbusier and Groupe Espace and the utopian legacy of the Soviet avant-garde. In the Soviet Union and its satellites, the synthesis of the arts had often provided a national inflection to architecture, in accordance to the Socialist Realist mandate for art “national in form, socialist in content.” As previously discussed, this was the case in the “Socialist Renaissance” of early-1950s Poland, as well as the various “national” ornaments in the pavilions of the All-Union Agricultural exhibition in Moscow.²⁴ In Yugoslavia, on the other

²⁴ Add page refs.

hand, such nationalist applications of synthesis were mostly avoided, in favor of abstraction that was often coded as internationalist.

This is a key difference, and it reflects the distinct roles assigned to nationalism within the two socialist systems. The protection of national cultures was a central trope in official Soviet discourse, and it is within this context that the motto “national in form, socialist in content” should be interpreted. Besides, the selective affirmation of national causes was one of the characteristics of the October Revolution, which thus gained valuable allies outside the Russian population, while at the same time demonstrating a clear point of contrast with tsarist Russian imperialism. Stalin, who was Georgian, had codified what would become the official Soviet position already in 1913, in a pamphlet entitled *Marxism and the National Question (Marksizm i natsional'nyi vopros)*.²⁵ As is well known today, this Soviet respect for cultural diversity operated more on the level of official rhetoric than in actual practice: Russian hegemony was never truly questioned in the Soviet Union, and certain national cultures (for example, Ukrainian) were systematically repressed under Stalin, and occasionally after him. This tenuous balance between socialist unity and national diversity was continued and expanded in the postwar period beyond the borders of the USSR: as exemplified by the Warsaw Palace of Culture, superficial markers of national culture were encouraged within the Soviet satellite states, as long as these were circumscribed within the overarching “socialist” (ie. Soviet) one.

In contrast, the constitution of a unified, socialist Yugoslavia after the Second World War was largely premised on superseding the previous sectarian tensions between the country’s many ethnic groups. Even during the Second World War, the country was torn between competing nationalist fractions (such as the Croatian Ustaše or the Serbian Chetniks) which had varying and

²⁵ Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954). The exact authorship of the pamphlet is still occasionally disputed.

often shifting alignments to the invading Axis powers.²⁶ In this context, Tito's Partisans emerged as a supranational contingent that united different nationalities under a commitment to resisting the fascist occupying forces. Subsequently, the focus in the early postwar period was to replace the various ethnic identities (Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, Macedonian, Albanian, Bosnian, Montenegrin, etc.) that had been inherited from the collapse of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires with a post-national, "Yugoslav" one. Again, this was by no means a peaceful convergence; it often occurred through coercion and suppression of cultural expressions that had traditionally served to differentiate the different groups, most notably religion. Still, the Yugoslav project was largely an anti-nationalist one and, unlike the complex Soviet relationship to the "National Question," early Yugoslav policy deemphasized ethnic differences.²⁷ In addition to the aforementioned Tito-Stalin split, this prevented any artistic formula of the "national in form, socialist in content" sort to take hold. It is these factors, along with the country's rapid modernization and its unceasing contacts with the West, that led to the unambiguous adoption of abstract art and international-style modernism as the official visual language of the country during the period examined here.

It is thus significant that the organizers of the 1957 Didactic Exhibition gravitated towards the Ciudad Universitaria in Caracas, which similarly relied on abstraction with a distinctly international orientation.²⁸ On the opposite pole stood another Latin American campus

²⁶ See Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 34-35; John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country*, second edition (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 201-32.

²⁷ Arguably, ethnic tensions were still simmering under the surface of socialist brotherhood all along, only to resurface with the breakup of the country in the 1990s. With the final Yugoslav Constitution of 1974, Tito responded to rising pressures for regional autonomy by allowing some powers to move from the federal to the regional governments – a premonition, perhaps, of the country's undoing in the 1990s. See Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History*, 305-15.

²⁸ As mentioned above, many of the artists involved in the Caracas project were foreign; as for the Venezuelans, most had strong ties to Paris, such as Baltasar Lobo, Alejandro Otero and Jesús Rafael Soto.

that also sought a synthesis between art and architecture: the Ciudad Universitaria of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico city, completed in 1954. While the architecture of both projects was modernist, the art in Mexico was mostly figurative, and often drew from the pre-Colombian traditions of the country.²⁹ A prime example is Juan O’Gorman’s building for the central library (1952), a windowless tower covered in polychrome murals inspired by Aztec art, also designed by O’Gorman. If the synthesis of the arts in Caracas signified the Venezuela’s equal membership to an international modernist culture, in Mexico it served the opposite purpose: it underlined the distinct, Mexican character of the campus and clearly differentiated it from similar projects elsewhere. This nativist use of synthesis was appealing in countries of the Soviet sphere that had endorsed “national form” in art and architecture. While Caracas was often lauded in the West (as well as in Yugoslavia) as the pinnacle of synthesis, this role was often accorded to UNAM in Polish and Soviet publications in the second half of the 1950s.³⁰ Besides, the UNAM campus continued the great tradition of Mexican muralism from the 1930s, which was associated with leftist politics. Notably, it included a mural by one of the movement’s three major figures, David Alfaro Siqueiros, who had been a member of the Mexican Communist Party and a devoted Stalinist.

In the anti-Stalinist, internationalist Yugoslavia of the 1950s, the Mexican paradigm of synthesis found little appeal. Yet the other option, that of Caracas, was too apolitical for a country in the process of inventing its own path to communism. By conjoining Caracas and Constructivism into a continuous narrative of modern art, the Didactic Exhibition of 1957

²⁹ For a comparison of the two campuses, see Luis E. Carranza and Fernando Luiz Lara, *Modern Architecture in Latin America: Art, Technology, and Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 162-69.

³⁰ “Miasteczko uniwersyteckie w Mexico,” *Stolica: warszawski tygodnik ilustrowany* vol. 11 iss. 4 (January 22, 1956): 12-13; Zhan Rozenbaum, “Arkhitekturnyi kompleks universitetskogo gorodka v Meksiko,” *Arkhitektura SSSR* (September 1955): 40-41; M. Antyasov, “Zametki ob arkhitekture Meksiki,” *Arkhitektura SSSR* (November 1956): 57-58.

expressed the desire for a more radical vision of synthesis, that would continue the work of the Soviet avant-garde into the postwar period. Such was the synthesis envisioned by its most active advocate in the country during the early 1950s, the group EXAT-51.³¹ This association of artists, architects, designers and art critics based in Zagreb had lasting effects on Yugoslav art and architecture, despite being formally dissolved in 1956.³² Many of its members, such as Ivan Picelj, Radoslav Putar, and Vjenceslav Richter went on to participate in the organization of the 1957 Didactic Exhibition, and therefore the exhibition's final stanza should be interpreted as a culmination of EXAT-51's efforts for promoting the synthesis of the arts in Socialist Yugoslavia. For EXAT-51, the synthesis of the arts would be the final realization of Constructivism's and De Stijl's efforts to transcend the divisions between mediums; through their writings and exhibitions, the members of EXAT-51 thus sought to transform the politically moderate model of Caracas into a radical neo-avant-garde proposition.

A Socialist Neo-Avant-Garde: EXAT-51

On 7 December 1951, in a plenary meeting of the Association of Applied Artists of Croatia (*Udruženje likovnih umjetnika primijenjenih umjetnosti Hrvatske*), the Yugoslav designer Bernardo Bernardi read the manifesto of the group EXAT-51, which he had just

³¹ The group derived its name from the initials of *Experimentalni Atelier* (Experimental Atelier) and the year of its founding.

³² EXAT-51 shares many characteristics with the *Groupe Espace*: both were founded in 1951, and both advocated for the synthesis of the arts that would be exclusively based on abstraction. However, they seem to have emerged independently, as there is no evidence of contact at the time of their founding. See Ješa Denegri and Želimir Košćević, *Exat 51: 1951-1956* (Zagreb: Centar za kulturnu djelatnost; Galerija Nova, 1979), 110. In 1952, EXAT-51 members Ivan Picelj, Božidar Rasica, and Aleksandar Srnc exhibited at the seventh *Salon des réalités nouvelles* in Paris, and began their involvement with the Galerie Denise René, where *Groupe Espace* members such as André Bloc were also exhibiting. This initiated a period of exchange between the two groups, which continued past the dissolution of EXAT-51, as seen by the inclusion of works by Bloc, Pillet and Vassarely – all *Groupe Espace* members – at the 1957 didactic exhibition. See also Kolečnik, "Conflicting Visions of Modernity and the Post-war Modern Art," in *Socialism and Modernity*, 122.

cofounded along with painters Ivan Picelj and Aleksandar Srnec, as well as the architects Božidar Rašica, Vjenceslav Richter, Zdravko Bregovac, Zvonimir Radić and Vladimir Zarahović.³³ The manifesto explicitly stated that EXAT-51's main task was "to focus its artistic activity first on the synthesis of all visual arts, and, secondly, to imbue its work with experimentation, because without it one cannot imagine any progress in the field of the visual arts."³⁴ Such emphasis on progress was widespread in the text, which was thus explicitly positioned as a reaction to the status quo of contemporary Yugoslav art: "By understanding our reality as an aspiration for progress in all forms of human activity, the group believes in the need for struggle against obsolete concepts and modes of production in the visual arts."³⁵ Following a Marxist line of analysis, the signatory EXAT-51 members stated that Yugoslav art was disconnected from the actual social and productive relations of the country. They saw their own position as emerging from the artistic debates of their time: "the group considers its founding and its activities to be a tangible positive outcome of the growing battle of ideas, which is a necessary prerequisite for the growth of artistic life in our country."³⁶

The manifesto also outlined how such visions of synthesis would materialize. First, any distinctions between "so-called fine and so-called applied art" should be abolished. Second,

³³ The painter (and later, experimental filmmaker) Vlado Kristl would join shortly thereafter. For more on EXAT-51, see: Ješa Denegri and Želimir Koščević, *Exat 51: 1951-1956* (Zagreb: Centar za kulturnu djelatnost; Galeria Nova, 1979); Jerko Denegri, *Umjetnost konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat 51 i Nove Tendencije* (Zagreb: Horetzky, 2000); Ješa Denegri, "Inside or outside 'Socialist Modernism'? Radical Views on the Yugoslav Art Scene, 1950-1970," in *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes, and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991* ed. Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003): 178-83; Valerie L. Hillings, "Experimental Artists' Groups in Europe, 1951-1968: Abstraction, Interaction and Internationalism" (PhD dissertation, New York University: Institute of Fine Arts, 2002), 28-60.

³⁴ The manifesto was reproduced in the pamphlet *EXAT 51: Experimentalni atelier*, published on the occasion of an exhibition of Kristl, Picelj, Rašica and Srnec at the Gallery of the Graphic Collective in Belgrade (29 March – 5 April 1953). An English translation of the manifesto has been published in *Impossible Histories*, 539.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

abstraction was fervently defended. Instead of “an expression of decadent tendencies,” it was deemed a necessary condition for the improvement of the “the sphere of visual communication in our country.” Unlike the forms of synthesis that dominated the official aesthetics of other socialist countries, which often heavily relied on figuration as the privileged carrier of ideological content, EXAT-51’s vision was non-figurative. Many later commentators have interpreted such insistence on abstraction as a retort to Socialist Realism and the greater Cold-War debates that pitted abstraction against figuration, which were also taking place in Yugoslavia.³⁷ As mentioned previously, however, Yugoslavia’s unique geopolitical position had limited the reach of Socialist Realism, and, although many Yugoslav critics supported figuration as the only option for politically engaged art, this was never officially enforced.³⁸ The denigration of abstraction that EXAT-51 seemed to be reacting against might have well been related to the persistence of traditionalist or academic tendencies that were present in many countries at the time, as Želimir Koščević has already pointed out.³⁹

The final point in the manifesto was that the synthesis of the arts should take place in “real time and space,” something that mirrored Le Corbusier’s insistence on an “*espace du réel*” in his 1950 speech in Venice.⁴⁰ This emphasis on art’s operation in “real” space, as opposed to the contrived space of the gallery, is a leitmotiv in many visions of synthesis from both East and

³⁷ This is the argument advanced in Kolečnik, “Conflicting Visions of Modernity and the Post-war Modern Art,” in *Socialism and Modernity*, 115-129, as well as in Ješa Denegri, “EXAT-51,” in *Exat 51: 1951-1956*, ed. Ješa Denegri and Želimir Koščević.

³⁸ The critic Grgo Gamulin is a prime representative of such critical tendencies in early Yugoslavia that favored figuration (often of a Socialist Realist sort) and were critical of modernism. See, for example, Grgo Gamulin, “Along with the Idolatry of Cézannism,” in *Croatian Art Criticism of the 1950s: Selected Essays*, ed. Ljiljana Kolečnik (Zagreb: Društvo povjesničara umjetnosti Hrvatske, 1999): 299-320.

³⁹ Želimir Koščević, “Introduction,” in *Exat 51: 1951-1956*, ed. Ješa Denegri and Želimir Koščević, 42-43. The two essays featured in this catalogue for the 1979 exhibition on EXAT-51 thus disagree on the status of Socialist Realism in Yugoslavia during the early 1950s, and EXAT-51’s relationship to it.

⁴⁰ See the discussion of Le Corbusier’s Venice speech in the Introduction. No delegates from Yugoslavia attended Le Corbusier’s speech, which was not published in full and thus had limited dissemination. For this reason, no tangible, direct influence can be traced from Le Corbusier on the EXAT-51 manifesto.

West at the time. It often belied an anxiety about the feasibility of synthesis on a large scale outside the confines of preexisting institutions such as galleries and museums. Yet it is precisely within such spaces that the synthesis of the arts was most often articulated: in France, the Groupe Espace organized exhibitions on synthesis, such as the one held in 1954 in the town of Biot; the magnum opus of Le Corbusier's vision of synthesis was the unrealized Porte Maillot project, which was also envisioned as an exhibition. Similarly, during its first years, EXAT-51 was caught in a paradox of desiring "real space" yet being confined to conventional exhibition spaces that were unavoidably separate from the public space that the EXAT-51 members they sought to influence.

And so the first public manifestation of the group following their intervention at the meeting of the Association of Applied Artists was a 1953 exhibition of paintings and drawings by founding members Picelj, Rašica, Srnec, as well as by Vlado Kristl, who had joined the group in the meantime [Fig. 3.12]. It was held from February 8th to March 4th in the Hall of the Architects' Society of Croatia in Zagreb, a significant choice of location given the group's program on the synthesis of the arts.⁴¹ Although a conventional exhibition of two-dimensional abstract works, its presence within an institution that housed professional meetings and debates about architecture, signified the desire for abstract art to partake in such architectural discourse. This was made explicit during the opening, when the architect Vjenceslav Richter, a founding member of EXAT-51, proclaimed that the paintings on display represented *only a fraction* of the group's activities.⁴² To the many negative responses that the exhibition garnered at the time,

⁴¹ The exhibition was later shown at the Gallery of the Graphic Collective in Belgrade (March 29 - April 5, 1953). See Kolešnik, "Conflicting Visions of Modernity and the Post-war Modern Art," 126.

⁴² Vjenceslav Richter, interview with Želimir Košćević, cited in Košćević, *ibid.*, 44. Ješa Denegri has interpreted the relatively small output of paintings by the group during the early 1950s as an indication that EXAT-51 members did not think that painting's exclusive purpose was exhibition. Denegri, *ibid.*, 117.

Richter responded that the paintings should not be seen in isolation from the greater synthesis of the arts to which they aspired. A pamphlet issued on the occasion of the exhibition reproduced the 1951 manifesto, thus making the connection to synthesis explicit [Fig. 3.13]. In fact, in his speech at the opening, Richter criticized the exhibition's failure to adequately convey the synthesis that was to come, although he conceded that this would have exceeded the resources available to the group.⁴³ The most sympathetic reviewers of the 1953 show, such as Ervin Peratoner, perceived Richter's claim through the more familiar category of the decorative arts: "abstract painting is just the most recent variant of decorative painting," he proclaimed.⁴⁴ This, however, contradicted the basic premise of EXAT-51's program, which was the abolition of the distinction between decorative and fine art altogether.

Richter's rhetorical maneuver sought to defend abstract painting's potential for social efficacy, which was then questioned in Yugoslavia as in many other parts of the world. Simultaneously, it countered the critical narratives of autonomy and medium-specificity that habitually accompanied abstraction at the time. The abstract picture was thus reconceptualized as a fragment of a greater vision for the transformation of society through the integration of all "plastic forms," which it temporarily stood for. In this conception of synthesis-to-come, an abstract painting in a gallery was a transitional object, which would wither away as the synthesis of the arts reached "real space." Such ideas are much closer to the utopian discourse of the historic avant-gardes from the 1920s, such as Constructivism and De Stijl, than the contemporary conceptions of abstraction as a means of self-expression, in the manner of Abstract

⁴³ Košćević, *ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁴ Radio review of the exhibition by Ervin Peratoner, broadcast by Radio Zagreb on April 19th, 1953, cited by Košćević, *ibid.*, 46. The sociologist and future member of the Praxis group, Rudi Supek, also interpreted abstract (mostly gestural strands, such as Abstract Expressionism and *informel*, as decorative at the time. See Rudi Supek, "The Confusion over Abstract Expressionism," in *Croatian Art Criticism of the 1950s: Selected Essays*, 433-46.

Expressionism or the various forms of *art informel*. Indeed, many members of EXAT-51 were explicit about their inspiration from these earlier movements, especially Soviet Constructivism. These were also the subject of the many regular discussions held by EXAT-51 members in the period between the group's founding and the 1953 exhibition, and culminated in the prominence of Constructivism in the didactic exhibition of 1957.⁴⁵ Explicit references can also be found in some of the works produced by EXAT-51 members, such the 1956 painting by Ivan Picelj entitled *Homage to Lissitzky* [Fig. 3.14].

The art historian Ješa Denegri, who has published extensively on EXAT-51, has argued that its activities should be seen as a continuation of Constructivism's prewar program.⁴⁶ Indeed, the group's utopian insistence on abstraction as a means of transforming society seems to affirm this. The legacy of Constructivism should not be seen as incompatible with the postwar discussions on synthesis, since a "synthetic" impulse for joining art and architecture into an indivisible whole often lay at the heart of the Soviet avant-garde. Indeed, one of the first post-revolutionary groupings of Soviet artists was *Zhivskul'ptarkh*, an association of painters, sculptors and architects led by sculptor Boris Korolev.⁴⁷ Its name, an acronym for *zhivopis* (painting), *skul'ptura* (sculpture) and *arkhitektura* (architecture), is a manifestation of synthesis on a lexical level. Active from 1919 to 1920, it united artists such as Aleksandr Rodchenko and Aleksandr Shevcehnko, as well as architects such as Nikolai Ladovskii, Ilya Golosov, Vladimir Krinskii and others. Initially named *Sinskul'ptarkh* (synthesis of sculpture and architecture), the

⁴⁵ On the weekly discussions of EXAT-51, see Denegri, "EXAT-51," 98. These were held weekly at the University of Zagreb, and focused on cases from the historical avant-garde, such as Bauhaus, Constructivism, Surrealism, as well as the local avant-garde movement of Zenitism. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Max Bill and Sigfried Giedion were also key references for the discussions.

⁴⁶ See Denegri, *Umjetnost konstruktivnog pristupa*.

⁴⁷ The most extensive monograph on the group is Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Zhivskul'ptarkh: Pervaya tvorcheskaya organizatsiya sovetского arkhitekturnogo avangarda* (Moscow: Architectura, 1993). See also Anatolii, Strigalev, "The Art of the Constructivists: From Exhibition to Exhibition, 1914-1932," in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932* (Rizzoli: 1990): 28-31.

group was founded in opposition to Ivan Zholtovskii's classicism and the academic division between mediums that he represented. Its main aim was a renewal of architectural form, inspired by the recent developments in painting and sculpture. Much of Zhivskul'ptarkh's production took the form of cubo-futurist sketches of fantastic buildings. Many of the group's members, such as Rodchenko, would go on to form the better-known Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhuK) upon its dissolution in 1920 and become central figures of Soviet Constructivism. This is not to suggest that the members of EXAT-51 were fully aware of Zhivskul'ptarkh; the Soviet group remained largely obscure until Selim Khan-Magomedov published a few articles on it in 1980s and a monograph in 1993.⁴⁸ Still, as evidenced by the examples included in the 1957 didactic exhibition, the Yugoslav neo-avant-garde appears to have had better knowledge of Soviet avant-garde than their Western European colleagues at the time. In addition, they gravitated towards the "synthetic" strands of the movement and were inspired by figures that straddled mediums and disciplines, such Tatlin and Lissitzky.

By contrast, during the 1950s Constructivism was often perceived in Western countries (such as Britain and the United States) as a more medium-specific, apolitical form of art, as represented by the brothers Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo. Benjamin Buchloh has named this "Cold War Constructivism," and has shown how it aestheticized Constructivist forms, voiding them of their political and utopian aspirations and thus adapting them for the Western culture industry.⁴⁹ Gabo's 1957 public sculpture outside of the Bijenkorf department store in Rotterdam appears to be an apt illustration of this: Constructivism's experimental forms were transformed into yet another polished metal sculpture, employed to decorate a site of conspicuous consumption [Fig. 3.15]. It was because of such widespread conceptions of Constructivism in the

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Benjamin Buchloh, "Cold War Constructivism," in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945-1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990): 84-112.

1950s that the Soviet avant-garde had to be “rediscovered” in the 1960s, shifting the emphasis away from gallery-bound abstract objects such as those produced by Gabo and Pevsner and towards the more ephemeral and openly political works of the Soviet 1920s.

Buchloh’s assessment is based on Peter Bürger’s trenchant critique of the postwar neo-avant-garde, articulated in his seminal *Theorie der Avantgarde*, first published in 1974.⁵⁰ For Bürger, the historic avant-gardes such as Dada and Constructivism should be defined in political terms: they constituted critiques of the bourgeois conceptions of art’s autonomy that began with the Enlightenment and reached their zenith in the late nineteenth century, with the rise of aestheticism and other iterations of “art for art’s sake.” In response to them, the ensuing early-twentieth-century avant-garde questioned the autonomy of art and sought to criticize the very institution of art as it had been constituted in bourgeois society. According to Bürger’s scheme, when key strategies of the avant-garde, such as the readymade and the monochrome, reappeared in the neo-avant-garde of the postwar period (for example, in Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* or Yves Klein’s paintings), they were voided of their original critical impetus. Reinscribed within the art institutions that they had initially sought to upend, such as art galleries and the art market, these gestures had the opposite effect: they reaffirmed art’s autonomy. Bürger’s theory still looms large in many histories of postwar art, despite having garnered much criticism.⁵¹ Hal Foster has pointed out that Bürger ignored the contemporary art of the time when *Theory of the Avant-Garde* appeared, most notably the various forms of conceptual art and institutional

⁵⁰ Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974); translated into English as *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁵¹ See, for example, the edited volume of responses to Bürger: W. Martin Lüdke, ed., *Theorie der Avantgarde: Antworten auf Peter Bürgers Bestimmung von Kunst und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976).

critique that gained currency during the late 1960s and 1970s.⁵² For Foster, it was only then that the avant-garde's true political project, the critique of art's autonomy, was realized, after the initial repetitions of the neo-avant-gardes that Bürger decried. Foster inscribed such repetitions of the avant-garde into a broader intellectual history of resurgences and returns in the twentieth century, a theme that structured his anthology *Return of the Real*, which opens with his essay on the neo-avant-garde. He compared these artistic returns to similar phenomena in philosophy and psychoanalysis, such as Althusser's revisiting of Marx in the 1960s, or Lacan's re-reading of Freud in the 1950s. In his 1969 essay "What is an author?" Michel Foucault discusses such "returns to the origin" in discursive practices, showing how the reexamination of Freud's texts modifies psychoanalysis itself, just as a reexamination of Marx modifies Marxism.⁵³ Following Foucault, Foster proposes the term "radical readings" (in the sense of *radix*: root) for such processes, and proposes a connection between such theoretical returns and the the post-1945 engagement with the avant-garde of the early twentieth century.

As previously discussed, de-Stalinization engendered another set of such returns, both theoretical and artistic, which were specific to the Soviet bloc during the late 1950s: on the one hand, to Lenin and the origins of state socialism, and on the other, to modernist forms of art and architecture that had been suppressed since the 1930s in the USSR, and since the late 1940s in its satellites. As discussed in the previous chapters, this was an effort to overcome Stalinism by returning to the October Revolution and the roots of the Soviet system. From the shift of official ideology to the "original" writings of Marx and Lenin, beyond their Stalinist interpretations, to the employment of these texts as the foundations of Eastern European Marxist Humanism in the

⁵² Hal Foster, "Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?" in *Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996): 1-32; previously published in a slightly different form as "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?" *October 70, The Duchamp Effect* (Autumn, 1994): 5-32.

⁵³ Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977): 113-38.

late 1950s and 1960s, such “radical readings” were key to the development of post-Stalinist culture in Eastern Europe. Yet these returns varied in each socialist country. In the Soviet Union, this process did not encompass the avant-garde culture of the 1920s or engage in any reexamination of Marx that would contradict Leninism. In contrast, in Poland the “radical readings” of the 1950s were much more thorough, and allowed for the emergence of the aforementioned “Warsaw School” of Kołakowski, Bauman and others, as well as the experimental culture of the Thaw, as represented by the Art and Research Workshops. Still, there were clear limits to this process: neither an open, official adoption of avant-garde art nor a radical revisionist Marxism that would subvert Soviet-imported socialism was ever possible, as made amply clear by the withering away of the experimental culture of the late 1950s by the next decade, as well as the emigration of many of its protagonists.

In this context, Yugoslavia was unique. Already anti-Stalinist since the late 1940s, many in the country pursued such radical readings, of both Marx and the avant-garde, further than any country in the Soviet orbit. Yugoslav politics in the 1950s often took on an experimental approach, with the development of novel structures such as the system of workers’ self-management that was seen as a continuation of the original workers’ councils of the early Soviet Union.⁵⁴ More importantly, it developed a strong current of revisionist Marxism that included theorists such as the philosopher Gajo Petrović and the sociologist Rudi Supek, who articulated trenchant Marxist critiques of the Soviet system.⁵⁵ Unlike its Polish equivalent that met a quick demise in the 1960s, this strand of Yugoslav thought became more prominent in the following

⁵⁴ For a Yugoslav report, see Drago Gorupić and Ivan Paj, *Workers' Self-Management in Yugoslav Undertakings* (Zagreb: Ekonomski Institut, 1970).

⁵⁵ See Oskar Gruenwald, *The Yugoslav Search for Man: Marxist Humanism in Contemporary Yugoslavia* (South Hadley, MA: J.F. Bergin, 1983); for a comparison of the Polish and Yugoslav strands of Marxist Humanism, see James H. Satterwhite, *Varieties of Marxist Humanism: Philosophical Revision in Postwar Eastern Europe* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992).

decades. In 1965, Petrović, Supek and others founded the philosophical journal *Praxis*, which became an internationally renowned platform for the exchange between Eastern and Western Marxist perspectives. Until its closing in 1974, *Praxis* published texts by Henri Lefebvre, Jürgen Habermas and Herbert Marcuse, along those by members of the *Praxis* group and other Eastern European Marxists.⁵⁶ The *Praxis* school ventured further into the critique of the Soviet system than most other Eastern European Marxisms of the post-1956 period, eventually challenging Leninism itself – something that created significant friction with the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, the country’s communist party.

If Soviet post-1956 reformism was defined by a return to Lenin accompanied by a turn to modernism, the Yugoslav response was more *radical*, turning to both the roots of Marxism and the roots of art under socialism, the Soviet avant-garde. EXAT-51’s neo-Constructivism is therefore a unique case, distinct from both the “socialist modernism” of other countries in Eastern Europe and the neo-Constructivism then current in the West, as represented by Gabo and Pevsner. As evidenced by the references to utopian politics in their manifesto and their writings, the activities of EXAT-51 fit neither the critical framework on the neo-avant-garde, as established by Bürger, nor its revisions by Buchloh, Foster and others. All these theories refer to “bourgeois society” – explicitly in Bürger, who repeats the term throughout his analysis, and implicitly in most other writings on the neo-avant-garde, whose geographical scope is limited to Western Europe and America. Yet this precludes the possibility of a neo-avant-garde that existed outside of Western liberal-democratic contexts, of a *socialist* neo-avant-garde that did not only repeat the forms of the avant-garde, but also its utopian aspirations. Following Foucault, it is thus

⁵⁶ For an overview of the *Praxis* journal in English see Gerson S. Sher, *Praxis: Marxist Criticism and Dissent in Socialist Yugoslavia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977); also, see the anthology of selected texts published in *Praxis: Gerson S. Sher, Marxist Humanism and Praxis* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1978).

possible to suggest that EXAT-51's reception of Constructivism sought to change it, to remove it from the margins of Soviet art (in which it had existed since the late 1920) and reclaim it as the best model for future artistic production under state socialism.

"Synthesis of Art and Life": Vjenceslav Richter

No other figure embodies this socialist neo-avant-garde in Yugoslavia better than Vjenceslav Richter, co-founder and main ideologue of EXAT-51. As he had repeatedly stated, his first encounter with the Soviet avant-garde occurred shortly after he began studying architecture at the University of Zagreb in 1937.⁵⁷ Despite the significant local avant-garde tradition from the 1920s that centered around the journal *Zenit* (1921-22), Richter discovered the work of El Lissitzky through a rather circuitous route, by reading the British journal *Commercial Art and Industry*.⁵⁸ Beginning in 1926 as *Commercial Art*, the journal was initially dedicated to advertising and window dressing, with an emphasis on making products attractive through packaging and presentation.⁵⁹ In the 1930s, the publication shifted towards industrial design and from the consumption to the production of commodities, something that was reflected in the subsequent changes of its title: it became *Commercial Art and Industry* in 1932 and finally *Art and Industry* in 1936. It was in the context of this shift that avant-garde art from continental Europe began making its appearance on the journal's pages, although it was always framed as "commercial art," featured for its potential to drive sales through innovative looks rather than

⁵⁷ See the biographical notes in: Vera Horvat-Pintarić, *Vjenceslav Richter* (Zagreb: Grafički zavod Hrvatske, 1970); Marijan Susovski, ed., *Richter Collection: The Vjenceslav Richter and Nada Kareš-Richter Donation to the City of Zagreb* (Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 2003).

⁵⁸ *Zenit* was edited by Ljubomir Micić and included contributions by Vladimir Mayakovsky, El Lissitzky, Vladimir Tatlin, Kasimir Malevich, Theo Van Doesburg and Karel Teige and others. For more on *Zenit* and its impact on Yugoslav art, see Djurić and Šuvaković, eds., *Impossible Histories*.

⁵⁹ The journal was published in London by The Studio Ltd. It continued through the 1920s and 1930s, as well the Second World War, albeit in a much smaller format. It ceased publication in late 1958.

any properly “artistic” concern.⁶⁰ In 1931, an article on Lissitzky’s exhibition designs, especially that for the International Hygiene Exhibition in Dresden in 1930, recommended them as successful models for commercial design, without any mention of their ideological specificity.⁶¹ Richter, who was already active in leftist politics at the time, was attracted to these images for what they really were: examples of putting art in the service of utopian politics. Arguably, these texts in *Commercial Art and Industry* began the de-politicization of the avant-garde that would become widespread in the postwar period; yet they also, ironically, indirectly contributed to the emergence of the politically engaged Yugoslav neo-Constructivism of the postwar period.

Richter’s studies were eventually interrupted by the war, during which he fought on the side of Josip Broz Tito’s Partisans, and was also incarcerated for his activities. After the war and throughout the period examined here, he remained a member of the Communist Party and was deeply committed to the ideals of socialist Yugoslavia. Like Sołtan and Hansen in Poland, he focused on exhibition pavilions during the early postwar period, yet perhaps not for the same reasons: while the Polish designers sought a way to circumvent the Socialist Realism of Stalinist Poland and to eschew censorship by catering to a foreign audience, Richter work on pavilions were a way to put his ideological commitments into practice. Inspired by the avant-garde designs of Lissitzky from the late 1920s and 1930s, Richter designed the official Yugoslav pavilions in

⁶⁰ The Bauhaus in Dessau was thus presented as a “University of Commercial Art” in a short feature: Edith Suschitzky, “A University of Commercial Art,” *Commercial Art* 10 (1931): 113-14.

⁶¹ “Display that Has Dynamic Force: Exhibition Rooms Designed by El Lissitzky,” *Commercial Art* 10 (1931): 21-26. A similar approach can be seen in other articles engaging with avant-garde art, such as Jan Tschichold, “The Composite Photograph and its Place in Advertising,” *Commercial Art* 9 (1930): 237-49, which reproduces photomontages by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, El Lissitzky and Gustav Klutis, again interpreted apolitically through the prism of advertising.

many trade fairs, such as those in Trieste (1947), Stockholm (1949), Vienna (1949), Hannover (1950), Stockholm (1950) and Paris (1950) [Fig. 3.16].⁶²

Once again, the exhibition pavilion, which operates at the intersection of art and architecture, became a laboratory for the development of the synthesis of the arts. Through his travels to various international trade fairs, Richter encountered the contemporary Western debate on the synthesis of the arts, as it had developed in the late 1940s. He also became an avid reader of Western publications that put great emphasis on the topic, namely *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui*, for which he would become the Yugoslav correspondent in 1958. By the time of the EXAT-51 manifesto in 1951, he had already embarked on adapting this discourse to the political context of early Yugoslavia, driven by his conviction that life could be transformed through art, itself based on the ideals of the Soviet avant-garde. By the end of EXAT-51's activities in 1956, Richter had developed his own formulation of synthesis laid out in his essay "Prognosis on the synthesis of art and life as an expression of our era." The essay remained unpublished for almost a decade and was eventually published in a slightly expanded form in his 1964 monograph entitled *Sinturbanizam (Synthurbanism)* [Fig. 3.17].⁶³

As the essay title suggests, the text is itself a synthesis of two distinct bodies of discourse: contemporary discussions on the synthesis of the arts and earlier avant-garde calls to join art and life. For Richter, the synthesis of art and architecture as realized in the Ciudad Universitaria in Caracas was only the first step towards a greater transformation of all lived space through artistic

⁶² On Lissitzky's influence of Richter's exhibition designs, see Denegri, "EXAT-51," 96-97. For a complete list of Richter's pavilions, see Jasna Galjer, *Architecture for a More Humane World: Vjenceslav Richter's Expo 58 Yugoslav Pavilion* (Zagreb: Muzej Suvremene Umjetnosti, 2011), 14.

⁶³ Vjenceslav Richter, "Prognoza životne i likovne sinteze kao izraza naše epohe," in *Sinturbanizam* (Zagreb: Mladost, 1964): 15-82. It is uncertain why the essay remained unpublished for so long, and Richter only states that the reason for revisiting it was a 1963 conference on the synthesis of the arts, which is otherwise unidentified, *ibid.*, 11. The second half of the book, written in 1964, focused on what Richter termed *Synthurbanism*, which was essentially an expansion of his ideas about synthesis on an urban scale, which will be discussed in the conclusion.

means. From the onset of his text, he grounded his discussion on the question of socialism, which he defined not only as the assumption of power by socialist parties, but the organization of all the productive forces of the world according to its principles, such as egalitarianism and collectivism.⁶⁴ In this context, every domain of human activity ought to change, and contribute to the creation of a new, socialist worldview. It is within this revolutionary framework that Richter inscribed his discussion of architecture and the visual arts: as prime generators of such a worldview, of “images of the world and of society.”⁶⁵ What he sought to suggest, therefore, was a new “artistic praxis” (*likovna praksa*), that would begin from the synthesis of the arts as it was conventionally practiced in the 1950s, but would lead to the emergence of entirely novel visual forms.⁶⁶ It is significant, in this respect, that Richter’s book was dedicated to “the engaged youth” (*angažiranoj omladini*).⁶⁷

The essay proceeds by establishing the specific principles that govern each medium of architecture, sculpture, and painting and serve to distinguish them from each other. Although this sounds similar to Clement Greenberg’s critical enterprise from the same time, Richter’s text had the exact opposite purpose. For Greenberg, the final aim was for each discipline to be “entrenched more firmly in its area of competence” and each form of art would thus be “rendered pure, and in its purity find the guarantee of its standards of quality, as well as of independence.”⁶⁸ Richter, on the contrary, sought to define what was specific to each medium in order to find ways to overcome it, and eventually abolish the distinctions between mediums altogether. Such specificities would thus become the common denominators that could serve as

⁶⁴ *Sinturbanizam*, 15.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁸ See Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993): 85-94. Originally from 1960, the essay was reprinted many times in the subsequent years.

the foundation for the synthesis that he envisioned. For example, he ascertained that architecture's main characteristic is that it represents itself: its subject (*predmet*) is none other than the materials and forms that are combined in its making.⁶⁹ This, he claimed, was also the case for modern abstract painting, which represents nothing other than its paint and its status as a two-dimensional image. Abstraction, therefore, could serve as a point of convergence between painting and architecture, and thus any proposition for synthesizing the two ought to be predicated upon it.

This convergence should not lead at the simple combination of art and architecture, as many artists and architects proposed at the time, but sought the total merging of the two: "In synthesis there is neither architecture, neither sculpture nor painting in the classic sense."⁷⁰ This also meant that the questions about the hierarchy between the mediums, around which the 1950s discussions on synthesis revolved in the Soviet Union, were a moot point.⁷¹ In a sense, Richter's essay suggests an abolition of classes within artistic production: architecture, fine and applied arts were thus all considered equivalent, different yet equal manifestations of human efforts at shaping lived space.⁷² This radical vision of synthesis was an integral part of what he called the "synthetic view of the world," which was imbued with the egalitarianism of socialism. This "classless" type of artistic production was centered around *plastika*, a cognate of the French term *plastique*, that vaguely encompassed all visual production, often carrying explicit associations with three-dimensionality, of art occupying real space.⁷³ Yet, unlike the French usage of

⁶⁹ Richter, *Sinturbanizam*, 19.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* See the 1954 Moscow conference on synthesis, discussed in Chapter 1.

⁷² Although he greatly admired Villanueva's Ciudad Universitaria in Caracas, Richter also criticized it for failing to exceed the pre-existing framework of synthesis as a superficial combination of art and architecture. See *Sinturbanizam*, 22.

⁷³ The word had a similar usage in other European languages, such Italian and Spanish (*plastica*). The German *Plastik*, although often used at the time in this expanded sense referring to all visual arts, did

plastique that never truly encompassed architecture and thus upheld the art / architecture division, for Richter *plastika* referred to the totality of manmade visual forms. As Richter's essay progresses, the distinction between art and architecture disappears; in fact, the word "architecture" is sparsely mentioned.

One of the ways of superseding the traditional categories of architecture, sculpture and painting was to view them as visual means of shaping space, as ways of generating what Richter called "spatial images" (*prostorne slike*).⁷⁴ For instance, he suggested that painting should abandon the square format, as well as its reliance on flatness, and thus become a surface that could envelop the body: the interior of a house could thus be reconceptualized as a concave image, or as an inhabitable sculpture.⁷⁵ Richter's calls for art forms that oscillate between different categories and mediums recall those of the Italian Bruno Munari at the time, a founding member of Movimento di Arte Concreta (MAC), an Italian group which, like EXAT-51, was focused on the synthesis of the arts.⁷⁶ Yet Munari envisioned such forms as ephemeral, and thus implicitly appropriate for the impermanent context of exhibitions. In contrast, it was important for Richter that they occupied "real space" and that they were permanent enough to contribute to a construction of a new (socialist) reality – to *build* socialism. It is perhaps for this reason that he gravitated to Herb Greene's Prairie House in Norman, Oklahoma, built in 1960-61 [Figs. 3.18-3.19], a less-known example of an "inhabitable sculpture" that he might have encountered

retain specific connotations of sculpture, according to the word's Greek etymology (from *plassein*, to model or to mold).

⁷⁴ *Sinturbanizam*, 45.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 30. See also *ibid.*, 33-45, on painting's needed escape from flatness.

⁷⁶ See Romy Golan, "Italy and the Concept of the Synthesis of the Arts," in *Architecture and Art: New Visions, New Strategies*, ed. Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen and Esa Laaksonen (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Academy, 2007): 70-72.

through US magazines, such as LIFE, that were in circulation in Yugoslavia.⁷⁷ Not only was the Prairie House realized, but it was emphatically material and permanent – a proper house and not an exhibition object. An irregular, curvilinear structure made from overlapping rough-sawn boards, the house was celebrated by Richter as a sculptural (or, better still, “plastic”) object that was “liberated from architecture and its standards of nomenclature.”⁷⁸ Its interior, consisting of the various geometric patterns generated by the boards, was similarly interpreted as a “spatial picture,” a new form of painting developed in real space – the space occupied by the viewing subject.

It is this viewing subject that constitutes the final, key ingredient of Richter’s vision of synthesis, as a “mobile-plastic, psychological element.”⁷⁹ In one of the few historical examples cited in his essay, Richter positioned the human body in the center of the synthesis achieved within the Gothic cathedral.⁸⁰ The cathedral had been a constant point of reference in modernism, from Lyonel Feininger’s frontispiece for the 1919 program and manifesto of the Bauhaus, to Kurt Schwitters’ *Merzbau*, a structure that similarly transcended the division between art and architecture, which he often referred to as “The Cathedral of Erotic Misery.”⁸¹ Richter’s interpretation of the cathedral as the pinnacle of synthesis went beyond discussions of architecture, sculpture and stained glass, and focused on the clothes of the attendants, their movements, their voices, the music they played, and even immaterial factors like their spiritual and intellectual life as essential parts of a cathedral’s essence. This lies at the core of Richter’s

⁷⁷ Although Richter says that he wrote the essay in 1954, the published version appeared in 1964, and was thus revised to refer to works that did not exist at the time the essay was first written, such as the Prairie House.

⁷⁸ *Sinturbanizam*, 22.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 15-17.

⁸¹ *Sinturbanizam* actually opens with a cryptic quote by Kurt Schwitters, printed in English: “I am to build a house of ice, because it is more solid,” dated 15 February 1945. It is not addressed anywhere else in the book.

and EXAT-51's insistence on synthesis occurring in "real space," from that is the space occupied by real bodies that move and interact in real time.⁸² The concept of the "spatial image" that Richter proposed was a phenomenological one: it referred to the changing perceptions of the world by a perambulating, embodied subject.⁸³ It is this shift of emphasis from the production to the reception of art and architecture that allowed Richter to dismiss medium-specificity and thus establish the foundations for his vision of synthesis.

The final portion of Richter's essay focuses on objects that directly interact with the body in space: the products of industrial design (*industrijsko oblikovanje*).⁸⁴ In accordance with EXAT-51's principles, Richter questioned the division between fine and applied arts based on the criterion of utility. In yet another rhetorical maneuver, he posited that furniture could be seen as "sculpture with a practical function," and he illustrated his point through another eclectic choice: Isamu Noguchi, an artist of his time that occupied the liminal space between sculpture and design.⁸⁵ This approach is markedly different from the expansion of the notion of applied art in Poland, as seen in the writings on "applied and useful art" by Aleksander Wojciechowicz; they are also distinct from the proliferation of the term "monumental-decorative art" in the Soviet

⁸² *Man and Space (Čovjek i Prostor)* is the name of an important Yugoslav journal, for which Richter briefly served as its chief editor. It began on February 15th, 1954 as a bi-weekly broadsheet, and became monthly from May 1959 onwards. As implied by its name, it had a rather "synthetic" purview, covering architecture, art, folk art, industrial design and other fields.

⁸³ *Sinturbanizam*, 51. Such perceptions were by necessity partial: the viewer cannot fully apprehend the totality of the world, but instead discovers it over time, through a sequence of "spatial images." This focus on space not uncommon at the time: an analysis of architecture as organization of space, as well as of its perception by an embodied viewer, can be found in Bruno Zevi's *Saper vedere l'architettura: saggio sull'interpretazione spaziale dell'architettura* (Turin: G. Einaudi, 1948), translated into English as *Architecture as Space: How to Look at Architecture*, trans. Joseph A. Barry (New York: Horizon Press, 1957). However, a key difference between the two texts is medium specificity: Zevi seeks to establish way of perceiving architecture that are specific to it, stating that while the public is become more aware at how to look at painting and sculpture, it tends to lack such skills for architecture. For Richter, there is no difference in the spatial perception of either art or architecture – the very distinction between the two is abolished.

⁸⁴ *Sinturbanizam*, 73-76.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

Union. In both those cases, the category of applied art was expanded to include all types of art that fell outside of the traditional model of gallery-bound, autonomous objects of painting and sculpture, and that had some sort of “utility” that lied beyond mere aesthetic contemplation. For Richter, however, utility should not be seen as the opposite of contemplation – in fact this division lay at the core of the problems that he discerned with contemporary art and architecture. To drive his point, Richter posed the rhetorical question: “What is the function of a chair when nobody is sitting on it?”⁸⁶

Written during the apogee of the discourse on synthesis in 1954, yet published in 1964, when the issue had begun to fade into history, Richter’s text is an oddity in the history of this phenomenon. Despite its eclectic references, idiosyncratic tone and its abundant neologisms, the essay is one of the most original texts on the synthesis of the arts produced at a time when the subject had already become a cliché. Conversant with the mainstream, politically centrist discourse on synthesis of the arts as it developed in Western Europe, Richter transformed it into a manifesto for a post-medium condition that he deemed fitting for the revolutionary society that he envisioned. Although he was deeply inspired by the utopian dreams of the Soviet avant-garde, he also admired the Western art of his time that often stood at the opposite ideological pole. Strikingly, Richter saw no contradiction between the two, such as when he extolled Isamu Noguchi’s “Freeform” sofa [Fig. 3.20] – which appears today as a token of bourgeois commodification of modernism at mid-century – as an example of a radical synthesis of applied and fine art that he envisioned. Rather than a symptom of ideological inconsistency, this interpretation was the product of a deep-seated desire to reconnect postwar modernism to its utopian roots in the avant-garde of the 1920s. Unlike Bürger’s model of a neo-avant-garde that

⁸⁶ Ibid., 68.

betrayed the politics of the original avant-garde, the practice of EXAT-51 and Richter sought to reverse this process, and to reinvigorate the old dreams of joining art and life, without necessarily ignoring or rejecting the modern art of the capitalist Western countries. In a sense, this was a “third way” for the postwar neo-avant-garde: non-aligned, not unlike the path taken by Yugoslavia, when it sought to navigate the geopolitics of the Cold War. It was only in a socialist country that had distanced itself from the the Soviet Union and approached the West, all the while remaining unwaveringly socialist, that such artistic positions could be articulated at the time. These eschewed the complacency and commodification of the 1950s Western neo-avant-garde, as described by Bürger, while not assuming the critical, oppositional stance that the “second” neo-avant-garde of conceptualism and institutional critique, as described by Foster. This was a neo-avant-garde of uncompromising utopianism, that sought to partake in the construction of socialism – as, it was imagined, the original Soviet avant-garde had done after the October Revolution.

Art and Production circa 1956

Still, Richter was loath to define his ideas as utopian. In the concluding sentence of his synthesis essay, he conceded that “all this might sound like utopia,” but he insisted that the synthesis of art and life that he forecast was a real, tangible potential, based on close observations of the art of his time. This was a paradox that defined the totality of his practice: the more utopian his ideas grew, the more he insisted that on his own anti-utopianism, on the need for operating in the “real space.” This challenge became increasingly pressing around the middle of the 1950s. As the rest of socialist Europe experienced the transformations of the Thaw and the constitution of a new, post-Stalinist socialist culture, the Yugoslav neo-avant-garde was ready to

conclude its experimental phase and join the realm of production. To use the terms of the Soviet avant-garde, this was a time of transition out of the “laboratory” phase of early Constructivism and into Productivism. Experimentation ought to give way to application.

It is thus not a coincidence that EXAT-51, an “experimental atelier” as its name suggested, was dissolved in 1956, just as the work of its members began to gain more prominence.⁸⁷ Other institutional structures that had not developed sustained connections to industry and production met a similar fate around that time. The most prominent was the short-lived Academy of Applied Art (*Akademija za primijenjenu umjetnost*) in Zagreb, which closed in 1955 after having been founded only in 1949.⁸⁸ The school straddled disciplines and mediums, in the manner of the Bauhaus and its postwar successors, such as the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm and the “New Bauhaus” in Chicago, later renamed as the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Richter, who had briefly visited the latter in 1950 when working on the Yugoslav pavilion of the Chicago fair of that year, served as the chair of the department of architecture from 1950 to 1954.⁸⁹ In accordance with Bauhaus principles, the Academy’s curriculum began with foundation courses in the first year and proceeded through workshops dedicated to different techniques and mediums. During his tenure, Richter modified the Bauhaus model by displacing architecture from the central position that it had held, where it was the focus

⁸⁷ Ješa Denegri has criticized EXAT-51 for failing to deliver on its promises for synthesis, and for insisting on a utopian approach that prevented it from actively participating in the rapid industrialization of the country. See Denegri, “EXAT-51,” 126. Such opinions were already expressed in Yugoslavia in the 1960s, such as by the critic Matko Meštrović, a co-founder of the New Tendencies movement. *Ibid.*, 127.

⁸⁸ For an extensive history of the institution, see Jasna Galjer, *Design of the 1950s in Croatia: From Utopia to Reality* (Zagreb: Horetzky, 2004), 43-83. See also Želimir Košćević, “Introduction,” in *EXAT-51: 1951-56*, 48.

⁸⁹ On Richter’s travels and their effect on his work, see Denegri, “EXAT-51,” 97; Susovski, ed., *Richter Collection*, 17.

of the final year and the culmination of all previous years of study. In Zagreb, it was replaced by a course on synthesis, described as the “the unification of all forms of art in space.”⁹⁰

With the withering away of such venues for experimentation, a new constellation of associations and institutions emerged, this time focused on the more tangible domain of industrial design. In 1955, the first Zagreb Triennial was held, modeled after the famous Milan Triennale [Fig. 3.21].⁹¹ Held in Zagreb’s Art Pavilion (*Umjetnički Paviljon*), a late-nineteenth-century gallery for temporary exhibitions, the biennale was curated by Richter. It showcased more than five hundred products of interior design from Yugoslavia, to a local public of about two thousand visitors.⁹² In both the types of exhibits and its installation, the Zagreb Triennial was similar to the many exhibitions of interior design that proliferated in many parts of the West at the time, if not a bit lacking in material resources [Fig. 3.22]. Yet it was complemented by a distinctly ideological message. In the preface to the catalogue, the architect Neven Šegvić, who maintained close ties to the regime throughout the period, described interior design in terms of Marxist Humanism: “Today, when we embark on a new, socialist humanism, and when we direct all of our efforts towards man and community, the humanization of life’s external appearance is at the forefront of artistic activity.”⁹³ “Humanization” was a recurring trope of the period that was often inextricably tied to the synthesis of the arts. Thus, typical 1950s objects such as plywood chairs, metal floor lamps and kidney-shaped coffee tables were inscribed within an avant-garde project for the transformation of life through art, not unlike Richter’s “revolutionary” reading of Noguchi’s sofa. Despite such grand aims, the Triennale struggled: its

⁹⁰ Galjer, *Design of the 1950s in Croatia*, 67; Denegri, *ibid.*, 13.

⁹¹ See the exhibition’s catalogue, *Zagrebački Triennale: Inicijativna izložba* (Zagreb: 1955). See also the entry on Zagreb Triennial in Jonathan M. Woodham, *A Dictionary of Modern Design* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 466.

⁹² Galjer, *ibid.*, 88.

⁹³ Neven Šegvić, foreword to the catalog, reprinted in *Mozaik* 6, 1956, 11-12. Cited in Galjer, *ibid.*, 89.

second iteration in 1959 was delayed by a year. This was to be the last one: in 1960, it was absorbed by the Zagreb Salon, a conventional exhibition of fine art – thus symbolically ending the constitution of industrial design as a distinct field of artistic production.

It is productive to compare the Zagreb Triennial to its equivalent in Poland, the Second All-Poland Exhibition of Interiors organized at the Zachęta National Art Gallery in Warsaw in 1957.⁹⁴ The Polish exhibition was largely devoid of ideological content, despite being an officially sponsored affair held in the country's most prominent gallery. Although visually similar, the modernist design that was showcased in the two exhibitions had emerged out of different political and artistic processes. In Zagreb, it was the culmination of years of utopian thinking and “laboratory” artistic work, and was positioned as a continuation and fulfillment of previous efforts at the synthesis of the arts. Much like the abstract paintings of the earlier EXAT-51 exhibitions, the objects on display were presented as fragments of a new, total reorganization of life according to socialist principles. In contrast, the Warsaw exhibition sought to divest everyday objects such as tables and chairs of the ideological weight that they had accrued under Stalinism, most prominently at the First Exhibition of Interiors of 1952, to which it served as an obvious counterpoint. The stylistic shift from heavier, ornamented forms to lighter, more functional ones from 1952 to 1957 only helped underline this transition.

Soon after the closing of the Zagreb Triennial in late 1955, twenty-eight architects, fine and decorative artists, many of whom had been associated with EXAT-51, formed the Studio for Industrial Design (*Studio za Industrijsko Oblikovanje*), often referred to by its Serbo-Croatian initials, SIO.⁹⁵ This was the first association for the promotion of industrial design in Yugoslavia,

⁹⁴ Józef Grabowski, ed., *Ogólnopolska wystawa architektury wnętrz* (Warsaw: Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, 1957). See also the discussion of the 1957 Polish exhibition in Chapter Two.

⁹⁵ Galjer, 94-113. In 1963, SIO became the Center for Industrial Design (CIO) in Zagreb. See also “SIO,” *Arhitektura* (Zagreb) 1-6 (1956): 46.

appearing at a time of great flourishing of the field in many parts of Europe. A pamphlet published upon its founding listed the main principles of the group, in both Serbo-Croatian and English, which demonstrates an aspiration to appeal to audiences outside of Yugoslavia [Fig. 3.23].⁹⁶ The pamphlet text describes the SIO members as “artists of the avant-garde” and states: “In its activity the group has not limited itself only to designing objects of industrial production, but has also spread its activity to propagating the art of the *avant-garde*, art education, home culture, etc., and – as its ultimate aim – to making its own contribution towards creating a total plastic synthesis.”⁹⁷ Through its commitment to both the avant-garde and the utopian visions of synthesis developed in the previous years, SIO aimed at continuing by other means the project of EXAT-51, which was being dissolved in the meantime. The shift from the painting exhibitions of EXAT-51 to the industrial design of SIO should be related to the greater impetus to seek the synthesis of the arts in “real space,” as EXAT-51 and Richter had long desired.

It is thus significant that the first public presentation of SIO occurred within the context of a state-sponsored housing exhibition that took place in 1956 in Ljubljana, entitled “Housing for our Conditions” (*Stan za naše prilike*).⁹⁸ Unlike the rarefied, small art exhibitions of EXAT-51, this was a large-scale display that was organized by an official agency, the Permanent Conference of Towns and Communities of the Yugoslavia. The exhibition’s purview was mostly technocratic, consisting of charts and photographs that focused on the technical and economic aspects of housing construction. Any issues of architecture and aesthetics were relegated to a secondary position, displaced to a smaller section at the exhibition’s conclusion. In another

⁹⁶ The pamphlet is reproduced in Denegri and Koščević, *EXAT-51: 1951-56*, 128.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* Emphasis in the text.

⁹⁸ See the exhibition catalogue published in 1957 in Serbo-Croatian, English, French and Russian: Marjan Tepina, ed., *Stan za naše prilike / Housing for Our Conditions* (Ljubljana, 1957). See also Sandra Križić Roban, “Modernity in Architecture, Urban Planning and Interior Decoration after the Second World War,” in *Socialism and Modernity*, 64; “Stan za naše prilike,” *Arhitektura* (Zagreb) 1-6, 1956, 46.

creative adaptation of contemporary Western aesthetic theory to the context of socialist Yugoslavia, this section on architecture opened with a reproduction of drawings from Le Corbusier's *Modulor*, a system of proportions that he began formulating in 1946. The exhibition's organizers fully adopted Le Corbusier's proposal, suggesting that the dimensions of typical apartments in Yugoslavia should arise from the *Modulor*, in a rather unexpected endorsement of Le Corbusier's idiosyncratic system.⁹⁹ The drawings were accompanied by the motto "Man is the measure of all elements of the dwelling," which was often repeated in both the exhibition and the catalogue. This should be related to the greater Marxist-Humanist atmosphere of the time and the efforts to balance overarching social visions with a new emphasis on the individual human subject – for which the *Modulor*, albeit somewhat misinterpreted, seemed to provide a starting point.

The three model apartments furnished with SIO objects that were presented in *Housing for our Conditions* were similarly embedded within the larger socio-economic discussion on housing in Yugoslavia. As examples of art's collaboration with industry, they were seen as crucial steps towards the transformation of socialist society through art, and the "synthesis of art and life" that EXAT-51 and Richter had envisioned. The objects themselves emphasized affordability and functionality, as seen in the modular furniture designed by Vladimir Frgić and Boris Babić. Their mutability appears to strike a balance between the need for standardization and mass production on the one hand, and the individuation and customization according to a specific user's needs, on the other [Fig. 3.24]. In other words, they performed the mediation between the individual and the collective that the self-proclaimed "humanist" socialism of 1950s Yugoslavia aspired to.

⁹⁹ Tepina, *Stan za naše prilike*, 55.

Much like the rest of the Yugoslav neo-avant-garde, SIO had an international orientation, and its members never missed a chance to circulate their work abroad. In 1957, the group participated in that year's Milan Triennale, where it won a silver medal.¹⁰⁰ This was the first national participation of Yugoslavia in the prestigious exhibition, and consisted of a model house constructed in the surrounding gardens [Fig. 3.25]. The section included model houses from the powerhouses of European design at the time: France, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Italy.¹⁰¹ Yugoslavia's inclusion in the section, as well as its distinction with a silver medal, demonstrates the rise of the country's status in such international venues, which continued the following year at the Brussels World Fair. Many former members of EXAT-51 contributed to the display, such as Richter and Picelj. The latter created an abstract tapestry (in collaboration with Slava Antoljak), which transposed his earlier work on canvas into a new medium [Fig. 3.26]. Such translations of fine into applied arts were common in the 1950s, yet what is interesting here is how the status of the abstract picture remains the same. As in EXAT-51's inaugural exhibition of 1953, Picelj's picture functions a fragment of a "total plastic synthesis." By transitioning from canvas to tapestry, Picelj's work came closer to both other forms of art and to industrial production – and it was precisely this transition that defined the second half of the 1950s in Yugoslav art and architecture.

This shift to production was supported by a new type of magazines that straddled art, architecture and design, as well as industrial production. The Belgrade-based illustrated magazine *Mozaik* is exemplary in that respect [Fig. 3.27].¹⁰² Established in 1953, it covered a wide variety of topics that all revolved around the expanded notion of synthesis that was then

¹⁰⁰ Galjer, *ibid.*, 60; Križić Roban, *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ See the official catalogue of the Triennale: Agnoldomenico Pica, ed., *Undicesima Triennale* (Milan, 1957), LXXIX-LXXXI.

¹⁰² Beginning as a bi-monthly publication, *Mozaik* became annual by 1958.

being developed in the country. Its title referred to one of the most typical mediums of the synthesis of the arts, a sort of painting that relies on architecture for its support, as well as traditional crafts of glass and ceramic for its realization.¹⁰³ In 1954, “industrial aesthetics” was added to the journal’s subtitle, and from mid-1955 until its closing in 1961 the conjoining of art and industry was also evident in the publication’s structure. It was divided into two sections: the first focused on the arts broadly defined, and the second contained detailed reports on Yugoslav industrial production, as well as the implementation of the system of self-management, and was replete with typical pictures of farms, industries, etc. As an interface between the two, an art print on thicker paper was inserted in the middle of the issue.¹⁰⁴ This was often figurative [Fig. 3.28], but occasionally it was abstract, as seen in the example from the 1960 issue, which consisted of a black and white photograph of a detail from an abstract gestural painting, which was overlaid with a color transparency, which the reader could manipulate to achieve different effects [Fig. 3.29]. In some issues there was a clear relationship between the art and industry portions of the journal, as well as the abstract illustrations: the 1960 issue focused on textile design, as well as the status of the textile industry in Yugoslavia, both visually united by an abstract cover image that featured a fittingly “interwoven” pattern [Fig. 3.30].

It is tempting to see *Mozaik*’s two-part structure as a literal interpretation of the Marxist theory of base and superstructure, although the fact that art always preceded industry in the issues could point to a revision of the orthodox view that base determines the superstructure. In any case, the publication reflects the Productivist turn that occurred in the Yugoslav search for synthesis around 1956, after the neo-constructivist, experimental phase of EXAT-51 and the

¹⁰³ A historical examination of mosaics from antiquity to the present, with a heavy emphasis on their role in the synthesis of the arts, was the main feature of *Mozaik* issue of September-October 1955.

¹⁰⁴ The practice of inserting limited-edition prints inside art magazines was common at the time: a prime example of this is the French journal *Art d’aujourd’hui*.

early 1950s. The journal's final trajectory demonstrates that this tension between art and production was resolved in favor of the latter during the early 1960s. Dedicated entirely to the domestic automobile industry, the last issue of *Mozaik* in 1961 is strikingly different from its predecessors: it barely deals with issues of design and aesthetics, and its previously daring graphic design was replaced by a more straightforward, matter-of-fact layout [Fig. 3.31].¹⁰⁵ What had begun in the 1950s as an aesthetic project, with theoretical texts by luminaries associated with EXAT-51 and the Yugoslav neo-avant-garde, such as Richter and Bernardi, ended up as a trade report on technical details of heavy industry by the early 1960s – a trajectory that neatly summarizes the fate of the neo-avant-garde's efforts to bring “total plastic synthesis” to the “real space” of Yugoslav society.

Yugoslav Synthesis on the World Stage, 1956-1961

As attested by the Yugoslav participation in the Milan Triennale of 1957, the period from 1956 to 1958 also coincided with the increasing presence of the country's art and architecture in international contexts. Like the Soviet Union and Poland, Yugoslavia began formulating in 1956 its proposal to participate in the 1958 World Fair in Brussels, which would serve as an opportunity to showcase its accomplishments since the end of the war. In the spring of 1956, a competition for the design of the Yugoslav pavilion was organized, which unfolded in two rounds.¹⁰⁶ The commission was finally awarded to Vjenceslav Richter, who produced the most

¹⁰⁵ Unlike the previous issues that had appendices in English and French, the last issue came out in two separate versions, one in English and one in Serbo-Croatian, perhaps pointing to the fact that it was meant to serve as promotional material for the Yugoslav automobile industry in trade fairs and other international venues.

¹⁰⁶ See Vladimir Kulić, “An Avant-Garde Architecture for an Avant-Garde Socialism: Yugoslavia at Expo '58,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 47, no. 1 (2012): 168-71; Jasna Galjer, *Expo 58 i*

striking design of the competition.¹⁰⁷ The project was based on a daring structural solution, which Richter called “foundations in the air:” the entire pavilion would be suspended with cables from a huge central mast, thus drastically minimizing its footprint [Fig. 3.32]. A reflection pool underneath would give it a hovering impression, appearing more like a flying vessel than a building.¹⁰⁸ The overall composition reflects Richter’s fascination with Constructivism and recalls similarly dramatic structural solutions of early Soviet works, such as Ivan Leonidov’s 1927 project for the Lenin Institute [Fig. 3.33]. At the same time, it is also reminiscent of recent developments in trade fair art and architecture, such as the *Skylon* from the 1951 Festival of Britain, a vertical sculpture similarly suspended with cables [Fig. 3.34].¹⁰⁹ Another source could be Buckminster Fuller’s *Dymaxion* house that similarly relied on a single mast, which Richter could have encountered, most probably reproduced in print, during his visit to the United States in 1950.

Like most of Richter’s oeuvre, the pavilion combines the most recent developments in contemporary Western art and architecture with the experimental, utopian ethos of the Soviet avant-garde. As Vladimir Kulić has argued, the end result became a potent emblem of the avant-garde status of Yugoslav socialism and its reliance on the innovative system of self-management, as well as the country’s firm orientation towards the future.¹¹⁰ In any case, the 1956 project for the Yugoslav pavilion seems to follow Richter’s calls for a type of plastic synthesis that would go beyond the mere integration of art into architecture and would instead be a hybrid of the two.

jugoslavenski paviljon Vjenceslava Richtera / Expo 58 and the Yugoslav Pavilion by Vjenceslav Richter (Zagreb: Horetzky, 2009), 16-17.

¹⁰⁷ Richter had placed second during the first, open round of the competition. The second round was closed, and included some of the winning entries from the first round along with projects submitted by invited architects. The second round consisted solely of modernist projects, many of which featured a staple of 1950s architecture, the paraboloid roof.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

¹⁰⁹ Vladimir Kulić has already suggested such comparisons: see Kulić, *ibid.*, 169-70.

¹¹⁰ Kulić, *ibid.*

In a manner similar to the paper projects of Zhivskul'ptarkh, the pavilion employed the compositional devices of Constructivist sculpture in order to develop a potent architectural solution. The final result was part sculpture part building, something that was underscored by the emphatic verticality of the mast, which visually dominated the inhabitable part of the pavilion. As will be discussed in the following chapter, the design underwent major revisions after the competition, and the constructed version reverted to a more conventional structure raised on *pilotis*, much to Richter's dismay.

While the country was developing the architecture that would represent it in the West, the Western architectural establishment was coming to Yugoslavia. In early August 1956 the tenth Congress of CIAM was held in the coastal city of Dubrovnik, after the invitation of a "local group-in-formation" lead by the architect Drago Ibler.¹¹¹ Most Yugoslav architects were excluded from the congress, which thus had little subsequent effect on the development of the country's architecture.¹¹² Still, CIAM's move to a socialist country – albeit the one closest towards the West – is significant within the context of the changing Cold War geopolitics at the time of the Thaw. The congress was also a key turning point for the history of postwar architecture, as it marked a generational shift away from the interwar masters such as Le Corbusier and Gropius and towards the younger members of Team X, which was named after the Dubrovnik conference. The synthesis of the arts, which had been a recurring theme at the CIAM congresses in Bridgewater (1947) and Bergamo (1949), had become increasingly irrelevant by that point, as the Dubrovnik delegates were more preoccupied with questions of habitat and the

¹¹¹ On the preparation of the congress, see Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 238-258.

¹¹² The precise reason for this exclusion is debatable. Vladimir Kulić has suggested that it was perhaps due to an effort by CIAM to limit the publicity of the congress, following the intergenerational conflict that had broke out within CIAM at the time, discussed below. Vladimir Kulić, "Land of the in-Between: Modern Architecture and the State in Socialist Yugoslavia, 1945—65," PhD Dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 2009, 197-98.

revision of the 1933 Athens Charter than the lofty discourse of architecture's "humanization" through art.

Yet the congress was held in a country where the discourse on synthesis was still alive and well at the time. In an inversion of the EXAT-51 painting exhibition of 1953 that was organized inside an architectural association, the CIAM congress was held inside the Modern Art Gallery of Dubrovnik, where paintings thus became the literal background for discussions on modern architecture [Fig. 3.35]. The eighth congress of AICA, the International Association of Art Critics, happened to take place in Dubrovnik during the exact same time. This overlap was perhaps intended to continue the trope of cross-fertilization between modern art and architecture, yet in fact demonstrated the growing isolation of the two disciplines. For while CIAM debated the future directions of modern architecture, AICA discussed the place of art in postwar society, and in that discussion synthesis was still a salient theme.¹¹³ Integral to the AICA conference was an exhibition of contemporary Yugoslav painting, held in the same gallery as the CIAM meetings. It showcased many works by EXAT-51 members and other artists who were involved in the discussions on synthesis, such as Picelj, Srnec and Rašica, in what would be their last exhibition together before the group's dissolution.¹¹⁴

This convergence between art and architecture, as well as between East and West, during the summer of 1956 in Dubrovnik marks several shifts in the development of the synthesis of the arts. On the one hand, it points to the increasing disinterest of the Western architectural establishment towards the lofty ideas of postwar synthesis as they had been formulated by Le

¹¹³ On the history of AICA, see Ramón Tio Bellido, *Histoires de 50 ans de l'Association internationale des critiques d'art* (Paris: AICA Press, 2002).

¹¹⁴ *Suvremeno slikarstvo Jugoslavije: izložba povodom glavne godišnje skupštine AICA, Dubrovnik, Umjetnička galerija, august-septembar 1956 / Peinture contemporaine Yougoslave: l'exposition à l'occasion de la huitième assemblée générale de l'AICA : Dubrovnik, Galerie d'art, août-septembre 1956* (Zagreb: Tipografija, 1956). See also Ljiljana Kolešnik, "Conflicting Visions of Modernity and the Post-war Modern Art," in *Socialism and Modernity: Art, Culture, Politics: 1950-1974*, 126.

Corbusier and the CIAM congresses of the late 1940s. Although the reforming of modernism was still a pressing question, the addition of painting and sculpture to it seemed less like a plausible answer. On the other hand, this was also a moment when the synthesis of the arts took hold in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe, albeit in significant variations. Against a background of rapid geopolitical changes due to de-Stalinization and the rising tide of decolonization, the epicenter of synthesis was shifting from France and Italy to countries of the “second world,” such as Yugoslavia.

Such changes developed in the shadow of a greater realignment of the world order that was unfolding further north along the Dalmatian coast in the same summer of 1956. On July 19, Josip Broz Tito met with Jawaharlal Nehru, the prime minister of India, and Gamal Abdel Nasser, the president of Egypt, on the Brioni (Brijuni) islands, Tito’s personal summer residence [Fig. 3.36]. The three leaders of young states that had emerged from the new postwar order shared a desire to evade the polarization of the Cold War by refraining from aligning with either the Soviet Union or the United States. This meeting became a major step in the formation of what became the Non-Aligned Movement, which had begun in the first Afro-Asian conference in Bandung, Indonesia the previous year. It would eventually culminate in the formal founding of the Non-Aligned Movement in the Belgrade conference of 1961, by the three aforementioned leaders, with the addition of Indonesia’s Sukarno, Burma’s U Nu and Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ The bibliography on the non-aligned movement is constantly expanding, invigorated by the recent surge of interest in the Cold War and the shift of focus towards a more global approach to postwar history. See Peter Willetts, *The Non-Aligned Movement: The Origins of a Third World Alliance* (London: F. Pinter, 1978); Rinna Kullaa, *Non-Alignment and Its Origins in Cold War Europe Yugoslavia, Finland and the Soviet Challenge* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012); Nataša Mišković, Harald Fischer-Tiné, and Nada Boškovska Leimgruber, eds, *The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War: Delhi, Bandung, Belgrade* (London; New York: Routledge, 2014); and the upcoming Sandra Bott, Jussi Hanhimaki, Janick

The venue for the Belgrade Conference was the newly completed Palace of the Federal Executive Council of Yugoslavia, a vast, monumental structure that marks the apotheosis of synthesis in Yugoslavia [Fig. 3.37].¹¹⁶ It was one of the first buildings to be erected in New Belgrade (Novi Beograd), the postwar development of the capital across the Sava river from the city's historic center.¹¹⁷ The district was developed beginning in 1947 and was thus contemporary to the monumental ensembles of Stalinism, such as the the Karl-Marx-Allee in Berlin, the MDM in Warsaw or the *vysotki* of Moscow; like them, it aimed at signifying the new, socialist postwar order expressed in urban form. Yet unlike these historicist Stalinist examples, New Belgrade was modernist. The low-rise Palace Federal Executive Council was its centerpiece, which thus provided another point of contrast with the ornate high-rises of Warsaw and Moscow. Its construction was long and protracted. In 1947, a Zagreb-based team led by Vladimir Potočnjak that included Anton Ulrich, Zlatko Neumann and Dragica Perak won the first place in a national competition with a design that established the general H-shaped plan, with a central core flanked by two large wings with offices. Until 1949, the design was reworked many times, oscillating between classicism closer to Soviet Socialist Realism and a more streamlined modernist monumentality.¹¹⁸ Following the Tito-Stalin split, the latter prevailed and resulted in the unadorned facades with simple colonnades of the final, built version [Fig. 3.38]. Due to financial difficulties, as well as changes in the country's political structures during the

Schaufelbuehl, and Marco Wyss, eds., *Neutrality and Neutralism in the Global Cold War The Non-Aligned Movement in the East-West Conflict* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016).

¹¹⁶ On the history of the Palace, see the monograph by Biljana Mišić, *Palata saveznog izvršnog veća u novom Beogradu* (Belgrade: Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture grada Beograda, 2011). The palace has changed name and function over the years: it has also been known as the Palace of the Federation and, recently, the Palace of Serbia. It still usually referred to by its original Serbo-Croatian initials, SIV (*Savezno Izvršino Veće* – Federal Executive Council).

¹¹⁷ On New Belgrade, see the recent monograph: Brigitte Le Normand, *Designing Tito's Capital: Urban Planning, Modernism, and Socialism* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014).

¹¹⁸ Mišić, *Palata*, 39-70.

early 1950s that affected the allocation of rooms to the different legislative bodies, construction was further delayed until it completely halted with the death of Potočnjak in 1952. It resumed in 1956, under the stewardship of Mihailo Janković, who altered the design by further simplifying the facades and by emphasizing the curvature of the wings, which brought the design closer to contemporary examples of institutional architecture, such as the UNESCO headquarters in Paris by Marcel Breuer, Bernard Zehrfuss and Pier Luigi Nervi.¹¹⁹ With the completion of construction in 1959, the work shifted on the interiors.

In 1960, a competition was held for the decoration of the ceremonial halls in the building's central core, and received overwhelming response from Yugoslav artists. The final result was an extensive program of murals and purpose-built furnishings that is unparalleled in Yugoslavia [Figs. 3.39-3.42]. The halls were named after each of the Yugoslav republics, with the largest one being dedicated to the entire country. They ranged in style and medium, from the figurative frescos and mosaics of the Yugoslavia Hall [Fig. 2.41] to the large abstract tapestry of the Hall of Bosnia and Herzegovina [Fig. 2.40]. The ensemble, which could have been featured in the pages of Paul Damaz's 1956 anthology, exceeds in sheer quantity and variety even the most salient examples of synthesis in the West, such as the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. Indeed, the Palace seems to be borrowing from the visual language of international institutions that were founded in the early postwar years, such as UNESCO and the United Nations, which similarly featured a combination of austere, monumental modernist architecture with an extensive program of synthesis. This should be related to the Palace's role as the birthplace of

¹¹⁹ See Christopher E. M. Pearson, *Designing UNESCO: Art, Architecture, and International Politics at Mid-Century* (Farnham, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).

the Non-Aligned movement, an alternative vision of a world order from the perspective of the second and third world.¹²⁰

In a sense, the Palace in New Belgrade constitutes a victory for all those who had advocated for synthesis in the country, from Richter and EXAT-51 to the organizers of the 1957 didactic exhibition. In less than a decade, the synthesis of the arts had moved from the exclusive realm of the neo-avant-garde to the official aesthetics of the state. Yet this was not the utopian, neo-Constructivist synthesis that many had wished for; instead, it consisted of the transplantation of rather dated Western models into the periphery of Belgrade, which in turn aspired to become the center of a new, alternative world order. The purpose of the art inside the Palace was not to offer viewers “new images of the world,” as Richter had suggested, but to pander to the complex identity politics of the country that had always been simmering under the surface of socialist unity. Inside the ceremonial halls of the building, art offered a national inflection to the impersonal architecture of high modernism. Even the abstract tapestry in the hall of Bosnia and Herzegovina [Fig. 2.40], was interpreted in official documents as a rendition of the landscape of the Bosnian highlands.¹²¹ This was a sort of return to “national in form, socialist in content,” a formula that, as previously discussed, socialist Yugoslavia had sought to avoid in the early years of its existence. Thus ironically, towards the close of the Thaw, the official Yugoslav paradigm of synthesis began to converge with the one current in the Soviet Union at the time, as seen in the Moscow Palace of the Pioneers, or the projects for the final competition for the Palace of the Soviets. At the same time, this visual language, which had become increasingly outmoded in many Western countries at the time, could nevertheless have had great appeal to the delegates of the non-aligned conference, who represented countries that struggled with balancing

¹²⁰ Another point of comparison should be the Le Corbusier’s government buildings in Chandigarh, although these projects began well after the New Belgrade Palace.

¹²¹ Mišić, 179.

modernization and decolonization with nation-building. Modernist architecture, which was part and parcel of such campaigns of modernization, could thus be “nationalized” and contribute to the constitution of new nation states.

Despite all this, the internationalist, avant-garde Richter did not miss an opportunity to contribute to the Palace, and designed the hall of his native Croatia [Fig. 2.42]. As already mentioned, his commitment to operate in the “real space” always overcame any strict attachment to his utopian theories. Much like his pavilion for the Brussels Expo that will be discussed in the following chapter, Richter had to compromise his ideas of a total plastic synthesis in order to adapt to the political and material constraints of the real space that he so desired. He added a “national” element to the room, a vast *informel* mural-sized painted silk by Oton Gliha that created the effect of an all-over wallpaper, and was supposedly inspired by the crags typical of the Dalmatian coast.¹²² Richter himself shifted his focus to subtler elements of plastic synthesis: he designed the modernist furniture of the hall, as well as the light fixtures [Fig. 2.43], which, in varying length and luminosity, were clustered in a long patch to a striking effect. His grand visions for a “total plastic synthesis” befitting socialism were only a memory by this point, despite his insistence to the contrary in his unending production of articles and polemics. Even as a fragment, his design for the hall of Croatia is mostly lost today: the furniture and the abstract carpet are missing and the lights have lost their intended effect [Fig. 2.44].¹²³ This withering away of Richter’s utopian synthesis is not unlike the gradual decline of socialist Yugoslavia in the following decades. In response to growing demands for autonomy by the country’s constituent republics, the 1974 constitution accorded more legislative power to local bodies, in

¹²² Mišić, 125-26.

¹²³ The state of the ceremonial halls of the palace is in constant flux: although most of the decorations survive, they are in different states of repair, as some of the halls have ceased to serve ceremonial function, and have been instead absorbed by the government agencies housed in the building.

turn stoking further centrifugal tendencies that led to violent breakup of the country in the 1990s. Arguably, the shift in Yugoslav synthesis away from the internationalist, experimental positions of EXAT-51 and Richter and towards a more “nationalist” version prefigured these greater transformations of the country. The Palace in New Belgrade once served as the definitive symbol of a confident country that skillfully navigated the antagonisms of the Cold War and emerged stronger from the post-1956 reforms of the socialist world. Yet today, with various halls in different states of repair, each dedicated to republics whose capitals are not in Belgrade, what is now called the Palace of Serbia reads more like a premonition for the violent breakup of Yugoslavia in 1990s, inscribed in frescoes, mosaics and tapestries.

CHAPTER 4: USSR, POLAND AND YUGOSLAVIA AT THE BRUSSELS EXPO (1958)

On April 17, 1958, the first World Fair of the postwar period opened its doors in Brussels. Almost a year after the successful launch of the first *Sputnik* and amidst a surge in nuclear testing by both superpowers, the Expo was held in the shadow of Cold War antagonism.¹ This was made evident by the arrangement of the fair grounds on the northern fringes of Brussels, where the enormous pavilions of the two superpowers visually dominated the fair's international section [Fig. 4.1]. The organizers sought to avoid the frontal, direct confrontation between the Nazi and Soviet pavilions that had been staged at the Paris World Fair of 1937 [Fig. 4.2], which in retrospect seemed like an ominous premonition of the upcoming war. In Brussels, the Soviet and American pavilions met at an angle; instead of facing each other, they faced a large square with the emphatically neutral name *Place des Nations*, which featured a large fountain with a sculpture by Alexander Calder [Fig. 4.3].² The title of the fair, *Bilan du monde pour un monde plus humain* (assessment of the world for a more humane world), similarly sought to gloss over Cold War anxieties by focusing on a shared humanity – a key trope of postwar culture that was about to reach its exhaustion.³ It is within this context that the Expo's

¹ For an overview of the Brussels Expo, see Gonzague Pluvinage, ed. *Expo 58: Between Utopia and Reality* (Brussels: Brussels City Archives; Éditions Racine, 2008); Rika Devos, Mil De Kooning, and Geert Bekaert, *L'architecture moderne à l'expo 58: "Pour un monde plus humain"* (Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 2006); For the Cold War context of the Expo, with an emphasis on the US Pavilion, see Jack Masey and Conway Lloyd Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations: US Exhibitions and Their Role in the Cultural Cold War* (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2008), 108-151.

² The sculpture, entitled *Whirling Ear*, still survives to this day. It is installed in central Brussels, on top of the so-called Mont des Arts near the Royal Museums.

³ Perhaps no other exhibition embodies this type of postwar humanism better than the Museum of Modern Art's *Family of Man*, which at the time was travelling through Europe. In his review of the exhibition published in 1957, Roland Barthes sought to debunk the myth of a shared humanity, as a way to gloss over the real differences between people, created by history and politics. See his review of the exhibition: Roland Barthes, "The Great Family of Man," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972): 100-102.

iconic Atomium, a pavilion modeled after the unit cell of the iron crystal, should be interpreted: it offered a playful antidote to anxieties about nuclear annihilation by converting the omnipresent atomic imagery to a site of entertainment and consumption [Fig. 4.4].⁴

Despite such rhetoric of peaceful coexistence, the allocation of plots for the erection of national pavilions became a hotly contested geopolitical issue. Some instances are particularly poignant: between the US and the USSR pavilions was that of Hungary, a country that had been at the epicenter of the Cold War two years prior with its revolution and the ensuing invasion of Warsaw Pact forces.⁵ By the time of the fair, the situation had “normalized” under the new leadership of János Kádár, who returned the country to the Soviet orbit. In return, he was permitted to instigate reforms and liberalizations which by 1958 had made Hungary “the happiest barracks in the peace camp,” according to a popular joke of the time. The remaining plot between the two superpowers was shared by the smaller pavilions of Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, parts of an emerging “Third World” that would become a new arena of Cold War conflict in the following decades.

Underneath the surface of such evident tensions lie yet deeper political transformations that took place at that precise moment in many parts of the world. The first was decolonization: the Expo coincided with the peak of independence movements in Africa, from the declaration of independence in Ghana in the previous year to the escalation of the Algerian War and the rising crisis in Belgium’s own colony at the Congo. World fairs had been inextricably tied to the colonial enterprise since their inception in the nineteenth century, and the 1958 Expo could be considered as the final episode in this long history. The Belgian Ministry of Colonies had a

⁴ This “humanization” of nuclear power was a recurrent motif throughout the fair. Perhaps its strangest manifestation was a “hands-on” display of nuclear isotopes inside the US pavilion. See Johanna Kint, *Expo 58 als belichaming van het humanistisch modernisme* (Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010, 2001), 163.

⁵ See György Péteri, “Transsystemic Fantasies: Counterrevolutionary Hungary at Brussels Expo ’58,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 47, no. 1 (January 2012): 137-60.

Village congolais constructed on the fair grounds, where people from the Congo would live for the duration of the exhibition, in order to display the “civilizing work” of the Belgians in the Congo.”⁶ After strong reactions of the would-be participants and protests staged by Congolese students in Brussels, the village was abandoned for the duration of the Expo, a ghostly reminder of the racist tradition of “human zoos” in fairs that had finally ended [Fig. 4.5].

The second political change that coincided with the fair – the one that concerns us most here – was de-Stalinization and the establishment of reform communism in Eastern bloc. The new emphasis on “Communism with a human face,” as well as the various academic attempts at a Marxist Humanism converged with the fair’s overarching theme of humanist modernization.⁷ At the same time, 1958 was also the moment when the new architecture of socialist modernism had become part of the official visual identity of the socialist countries of Eastern Europe. This resulted in an architectural *rapprochement* between the two camps at the height of the Cold War: the pavilions of the Soviet Union, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia seemed as committed to the modern materials of glass and steel and to light construction and prefabrication as those of the Western countries [Fig. 1.33, 4.6.-4.8].⁸ This often came as a surprise to Western observers who expected a fundamentally different architectural language (presumably the historicist variants of Stalinism) that would correspond to the diametrically opposite politics of

⁶ See Pascal Blanchard et al., *L’invention du sauvage* (Paris: Musée du Quai Branly, 2011), 338-340. This exhibition traced the history of “human zoos” and other displays of human subjects, with a particular emphasis on World Fairs.

⁷ On the theme of humanism at the Brussels expo, see Johanna Kint, *Expo 58 als belichaming van het humanistisch modernisme*. The term was repeated ad nauseam in the publications issued on the occasion of the Expo, such as the monthly magazine *Objectif 58*, published in the few years leading up to the fair.

⁸ Two more socialist countries were going to be represented in the expo, Bulgaria and Romania, as attested by correspondence with the Belgian organizers. See Archives générales du Royaume de Belgique,” BE-A0510 / F 1760, fonds 3199 and 3200 (Bulgaria) and 3220 (Romania). Both countries retracted their applications, before the pavilion design phase, apparently due to financial constraints.

Eastern Europe. An unidentified reviewer for the American journal *Architectural Record* announced at the time: “They are not any more a world apart.”⁹

Yet as previously shown, the art and architecture of socialist Eastern Europe at the time not uniform, and neither was its politics, which was far from aligned with the West. This chapter seeks to look beyond the apparent consensus on the architecture of high modernism.¹⁰ It focuses on the Soviet and Yugoslav pavilions at the Brussels Expo, as well as the unbuilt pavilion of Poland, all of which constitute the culmination of the processes of artistic change discussed in the previous chapters. Particular emphasis will be given to the place assigned to art in each case, and its relationship to the architecture of the pavilions. I argue that the synthesis of the arts provides an effective heuristic method for the study of the Expo, given the wide array of different relationships between art and architecture that coexisted in Brussels. These ranged from traditional exhibitions of framed paintings and sculptures on podiums, as seen in the USSR pavilion, to murals integrated into buildings, in a form of synthesis of the arts typical of the earlier 1950s.

It is significant that the countries where this second model had been popular, such as France and Italy, had begun to abandon it in favor of a greater emphasis on technology and design. Even Le Corbusier, who had been the major proponent of a synthesis of the arts that relied on murals, sculptures and tapestries, changed course in Brussels. The famous Philips Pavilion, which he designed with Yannis Xenakis, represented a new conception of synthesis that was more of an immersive environment than a building decorated with art in a typical

⁹ “Architecture at Brussels: Festival of Structure,” *Architectural Record* vol. 123, no. 6 (June 1958): 163. The idea that the strict division between two competing political systems of the Cold War had its corollary in two irreconcilable aesthetics still persisted in the Western literature for decades to come, despite its inability to address phenomena such as socialist modernism.

¹⁰ This is often the way that the Expo’s architecture is interpreted: See Devos, De Kooning, Bekaert, *L’architecture moderne à l’expo 58*.

sense.¹¹ Inside a paraboloid structure of reinforced concrete, an audiovisual spectacle entitled “Poème électronique” was presented in eight-minute loops [Fig. 4.9-4.10]. It consisted of color lighting and static images selected by Le Corbusier that were projected on the undulating walls of the interior. Edgar Varèse’s musical composition of the same title accompanied the images, played through more than a hundred small speakers that were embedded in the structure.¹²

Corporate sponsorship in World Fairs was not entirely new; examples of this can be already be found at the New York Fair of 1939. Yet this was indeed a significant shift of emphasis. Instead of showcasing actual machinery and devices, as so many other pavilions have done since Ferdinand Dutert’s Galerie des machines at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889 and still did in Brussels (such as those of Great Britain, Soviet Union and others), the Philips pavilion offered an immediate, multi-sensory experience of the future that was made possible by the technology produced by the corporation.

The more conventional model of synthesis that relied on murals was taken up by countries at the periphery of modernism, such as Turkey. Its pavilion by Utarit İzgi and others consisted of two prefabricated cubic buildings with light curtain walls.¹³ These were connected by a large, detached mosaic by the Turkish artist Bedri Rahmi Eyuboğlu, which connected the two interiors and the exterior, spanning the length of the plot [Fig. 4.11]. Featuring modernist

¹¹ See Marc Treib, *Space Calculated in Seconds: The Philips Pavilion, Le Corbusier, Edgard Varèse* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996). See also the book published on the occasion of the Expo: Le Corbusier, *Le Poème électronique* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1958).

¹² Although it was commissioned by an electronics manufacturer in order to showcase its newest technology, the pavilion still reflected the humanist context of the fair. Many images could have been included in the *Family of Man* exhibition; they focused on an a-historical human condition of babies and mothers of different races, interspersed with Le Corbusier’s emblematic drawing of a hand, which stood for creativity. Another set of images depicted works of art, mostly African, entirely devoid of context - yet another recurring trope of the time, as seen in André Malraux’s book *Voices of Silence*, published in 1951.

¹³ See Selda Bancı, “Turkish Pavilion in the Brussels Expo ’58: A Study on Architectural Modernization in Turkey During the 1950s,” Master’s Thesis, Graduate School of Social Sciences, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, 2009. <https://etd.lib.metu.edu.tr/upload/12610465/index.pdf> (accessed 23 June 2015).

interpretations of Ottoman motifs, the mural followed the “nationalist” paradigm of modernist synthesis, as also seen at the Palace of the Federal Executive Council in New Belgrade: It provided a local inflection to an otherwise “international” architecture. This is a further example of the migration of the epicenter of synthesis from Western Europe to the second and third worlds towards the end of the 1950s. A section of the nine-volume catalogue of the exhibition, published in 1961, focused on the “monumental art” in the international section. It included a series of page spreads with images of works integrated in the pavilions, with Western and Eastern Europe as well as North and South America equally represented [Fig. 4.12].¹⁴ Such works were described as “counterpoints” to modern architecture, reflecting the widespread trope of the 1950s about art’s ability to humanize the mechanized, technologically advanced architecture of the time.

This was generally the role assigned to art by the Expo’s organizers: a humanist counterbalance to the technology, industry and consumption that formed the actual content of the fair. Planned to coincide with the opening of the Expo, a plenary meeting of AICA was held in Brussels, with the theme “Man Facing Art” (*L’homme devant l’art*).¹⁵ In speech after speech, the conference participants discussed art’s ability to express “human genius,” in accordance to the lofty humanist discourse that had been popular in the early 1950s. As seen by Roland Barthes’ reaction to the *Family of Man* exhibition, this type of conciliatory humanism had become increasingly untenable in the late 1950s, if not outright irrelevant. Such high aspirations for the role of art at the Expo soon clashed with the bathetic reality of the fair: the AICA congress was

¹⁴ “L’art monumental et les sections étrangères,” *Exposition universelle et internationale de Bruxelles, 1958*, vol. 5 (Brussels: Commissariat général du Gouvernement près l’Exposition universelle et internationale de Bruxelles 1958, 1959-1962): 55-82.

¹⁵ *Exposition universelle et internationale de Bruxelles, 1958*, vol. 2: “Les messages et les congrès.” The aica conference on 14-18 April was organized by the Association Belge des Critiques d’Art.

only the first in a long list of trade conferences that spanned the Expo's duration, and even included the European Potato Wholesalers Association.

This sort of humanism also imbued the most ambitious art project of the Brussels Expo, a large-scale exhibition entitled "Man and Art" that was never realized due to unspecified "events of international politics."¹⁶ Inspired by Malraux's *Musée imaginaire*, the exhibition aimed at demonstrating the "fundamental unity of human sensibility that lies underneath all the different art forms," by showcasing works of art of the widest possible variety, chosen from all cultures and periods and organized along universal themes of love, death, faith etc.¹⁷ Its cancellation, most probably due to the Cold-War divisions of the time, achieved the exact opposite effect: it demonstrated that such "shared humanity" could not overcome the real, political divisions of the world, neither could it de-politicize human history. Finally, the main official art exhibition of the Expo was dedicated to recent art. Entitled "Fifty Years of Modern Art," it was curated by an international committee with members from both Cold War camps [Fig. 4.13].¹⁸ As a result, the exhibition included a significant body of Soviet Socialist Realist works by artists such as Aleksandr Gerasimov, Vera Mukhina and Isaak Brodskii, many made at the height of Stalinism in the late 1930s [Fig. 4.14]. The catalogue strove to describe Socialist Realism in politically neutral terms, listing it as one of the possible directions of modern art, along with Fauvism, Cubism, Expressionism etc. Unlike the modern art exhibition catalogue, which was a product of

¹⁶ Maurice Lambillote, "Synthèse," in *Exposition universelle et internationale de Bruxelles, 1958*, vol. 8, 20.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *50 ans d'art moderne* (Brussels: Palais international des beaux-arts, 1958). Also, *Exposition universelle et internationale de Bruxelles, 1958*, vol. 5. It appears that the Belgian organizers agreed to the large number of Socialist Realist works in the exhibition in exchange for the loans of modernist works by Matisse, Picasso, Cezanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh, from the Hermitage and Pushkin museums, which had not been shown in the West since the October Revolution. See Florence Hespel, "Bruxelles 1958: Carrefour mondial de l'art," in *Expo 58: L'art contemporain à l'exposition universelle*, ed. Virginie Devillez (Brussels: Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique and Gent: Editions Snoeck, 2008), 26.

an international committee, the multivolume catalogue of the entire Expo published a few years later was solely authored by the Belgian organizers.¹⁹ In it, the Soviet works were reproduced along with Surrealism, as different examples of figuration [Fig. 4.15], and were compared in the text to works by modern realist artists, such as Edward Hopper, Ben Shahn and Charles Sheeler.²⁰ Reflecting on the exhibition a few years after the Expo closed, the official catalogue stated that the inclusion of these Soviet works “allowed the visitor to objectively form an idea about the artistic value and ideological significance of such art that ostensibly lies outside of the ‘formalist’ tendencies of the West.”²¹ Thus whereas architecture and design became increasingly shared at a time of modernism’s expansion, art was still a point of differentiation between political systems. It is against this background that the pavilions of the Soviet Union, Poland and Yugoslavia operated. They presented not only commodities, statistics and technological achievements, but also different visions about art’s role in a socialist society.

A Crystal Palace of the Soviets: The USSR Pavilion

With an area of 25,000 square meters, the Soviet pavilion by Anatolii Polyanskii and others was among of the largest in the entire fair [Fig. 1.33].²² Emphatically devoid of any decorative “excesses,” as stipulated by Khrushchev’s recent decree, the pavilion was essentially a box of corrugated glass with few distinguishing features other than a portico topped with the letters URSS and the emblem of the country on the façade. The structure comprised of modular

¹⁹ The exact author of each text published in the eight-volume catalogue is not always identified.

²⁰ *Exposition universelle et internationale de Bruxelles, 1958*, vol. 5, 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² The team also included Y. Abramov, A. Boretskii and V. Dubov. See the Soviet monograph on the pavilion: Anatolii T. Polyanskii and Yurii V. Ratskevich, *Vsemirnaya Vystavka v Bryussele 1958: Pavil'on SSSR* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo literatury po stroitel'stvu, arkhitekture i stroitel'nym materialam, 1960).

elements of steel and glass, which could later be reassembled in Moscow as a permanent exhibition space, following the example of its British ancestor, Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace at the 1851 World Fair in London.²³ Paxton's building has been often recognized as a turning point in the development of modern architecture by prominent architectural historians, such as Sigfried Giedion.²⁴ Arguably, this was also the place of the Soviet pavilion within the history of postwar Soviet architecture: it represented a new beginning, away from the historicism of Stalinism and towards the new architecture of the Thaw. Upon the opening of the exhibition, *Pravda* proudly announced: "Our new architecture makes its first steps in foreign soil."²⁵ The building's lightness and transparency seemed to symbolize the new openness sought after the purportedly more liberal Khrushchev administration.

Yet the rejection of historicist ornament did not necessarily abolish the many classicist tendencies of Soviet architecture. Due to its oblong plan [Fig. 4.16] and classical proportions, the Soviet pavilion was often referred to by the press as a "Parthenon of steel and glass."²⁶ The colonnade of the portico, as well as the pavilion's majestic stepped base that functioned like the *crepidoma* of a Greek temple, amplified this air of somber classicism. This was in stark opposition to the preeminence of paraboloid roofs and other novel structural solutions of many foreign pavilions, such as that of France directly across the *Place des nations*. On the other hand, the rotunda of the adjacent US Pavilion, designed by Edward Durrell-Stone, was another

²³ This never happened, see below. As attested by correspondence held in the Expo 58 archive, the Soviets abandoned the pavilion on the grounds well past the deadline for disassembly set by the Belgian organizers. See Archives générales du Royaume de Belgique, BE-A0510 / F 1760, fonds 3209.

²⁴ Sigfried Giedion, *Space Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 249-255.

²⁵ Cited in Iurii Gerchuk, "The Aesthetics of Everyday Life in the Khrushchev Thaw in the USSR (1954-64), in *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, ed. Susan E. Reid and David Crowley (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2000), 83.

²⁶ Anna Petrova, Nelli Podgorskaya and Ekaterina Usova, *Pavil'ony SSSR na mezhdunarodnykh vystavkakh* (Moscow: Mayer, 2013), 167.

modernist interpretation of ancient architecture, this time of a Roman rotunda complete with a peristyle and a large *oculus* on its roof [Fig. 4.17].²⁷ Given Khrushchev's recent attacks on architectural ornament, it was only ironic that the US pavilion's façade was covered in an ornamental latticework, typical of Durrell-Stone's work at the time, such as the US Embassy in New Delhi.

The Soviet pavilion's generally bare exterior contradicted the great emphasis given to the synthesis of the arts in the Soviet Union at that time. This could have been due to concerns over cost, or perhaps because there was not enough time for a new model of synthesis to fully crystallize, as happened with the Moscow Palace of the Pioneers shortly thereafter.²⁸ According to earlier models and drawings submitted to the Belgian organizers, a large allegorical sculpture of a woman in classical garb holding a model of an atom was to be positioned next to the pavilion's entrance [Fig. 4.18].²⁹ In the realized version all the artworks, often of an unreformed, Socialist Realist style, were displayed inside the pavilion. The colossal statue of Lenin that dominated the interior set the tone for most of the art in the Soviet building [Fig. 4.19-4.20]. Created by the sculptor Matvey Manizer, one of the most prominent portraitists of Lenin, it was indistinguishable from similar examples from the height of Stalinism. Its placement reveals yet another classical reference: standing on a podium in the center of a sky-lit central "nave," surrounded by a balcony on three sides, Lenin occupied the place of Athena's gold and ivory statue inside the Parthenon. This Greek temple of the Soviets might have been an attempt to interpret the humanist theme of the expo, but it was also a literal representation of the Soviet cult

²⁷ Masey and Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations*, 108-151. See also the official catalogue of the pavilion: *This Is America: Official United States Guide Book*, Brussels World's Fair, 1958.

²⁸ See Chapter 1.

²⁹ Archives générales du Royaume de Belgique, BE-A0510 / F 1760, fonds 3214.

of personality, which – despite being so criticized by Khrushchev in 1956 in reference to Stalin – still constituted the official approach to Lenin for decades to come.

The centrality of Lenin reflects the Soviet Union's turn to its origins during this period, the renewed emphasis on the Bolshevik leader functioning as an antidote to the Stalinist aberration. A large mural in painted tiles depicting the Red Square provided the background for the portrait, thus reinscribing Lenin in the epicenter of Soviet political power [Fig. 4.20]. It recreated in three dimensions one of the staple images of Socialist Realist painting from the 1930s, that of Lenin at the Kremlin. In Brussels, this image was updated to include one of the Stalinist *vysocki* in the background, which signified the postwar reconstruction of the capital under Stalin. As for Lenin, his usual determined outward gaze appeared directed for the first towards a very tangible object: the first Sputnik, suspended in mid-air before him [Fig. 4.21]. By the time of the Brussels Expo, three Sputniks had been launched, and replicas of all three were exhibited inside the pavilion: Sputnik 1 suspended in mid-air, and Sputniks 2 and 3 on the floor in front of Lenin. This staging carefully staged a new political message: Lenin's revolutionary vision had led to concrete technological progress.

If the relationship between art and technology (and its corollary between humanism and progress) was one of the main themes of the fair, this was an extreme juxtaposition of the two: one of the fair's most traditional artworks (the Lenin statue) behind its most technologically advanced object (the Sputnik). Around this pairing, a wide array of exhibits was displayed, in a hodgepodge that was typical of world fairs. These included Siberian folk crafts, a model of a nuclear submarine, the latest in Soviet fashion and a hands-on mining display [Fig. 4.22-4.23]. Unlike the turn towards consumer goods and light industries in the Western pavilions, the Soviet display still put strong emphasis on industrial production and heavy machinery. In fact, earlier

versions of the pavilion, as seen in drawings held at the Expo 58, included a separate wing entirely dedicated to heavy industry, which was then subsequently eliminated.³⁰ During the preparations for the fair, members of the Soviet organizing committee acknowledged the need for a greater focus on new consumer products, but they also agreed that the ones available were subpar.³¹

Arguably, this reasoning could also apply to the aesthetics of the pavilion as a whole. The need to move past the Stalinist paradigm might have been acknowledged at home, but was not entirely attainable in practice. While the pavilion's modernist shell signified a break with Stalinism and a convergence with the West, the art within was still Socialist Realist. As a result, a disjunction between art and architecture arose, and the much desired synthesis of the arts broke down. This was most evident in the two sculptures near the entrance of the pavilion, depicting one of the most popular subjects of Socialist Realism: a *Rabochii* (male industry worker) and a *Kolkhoznitsa* (female member of a collective farm) [Fig. 4.24].³² The statues were obvious references to the iconic work by Vera Mukhina that topped Boris Iofan's Soviet pavilion at the Paris World Fair of 1937, one of the most resilient symbols of Soviet power. The 1958 version by Alexei Zelenskii, one of Mukhina's students, retained much of the original iconography, yet divided the couple into two free-standing sculptures. The iconic power of the 1937 work was thus tamed: instead of thrusting forward bearing the hammer and sickle, the two figures were posing holding their attributes (a welding tool for the worker and a bunch of wheat for the

³⁰ Archives générales du Royaume de Belgique, BE-A0510 / F 1760, fonds 3219.

³¹ Susan E. Reid, "The Soviet Pavilion at Brussels '58: Convergence, Conversion, Critical Assimilation, or Transculturation," Cold War International History Project Working Papers (December 2010), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/WP62_Reid_web_V3sm.pdf (accessed June 25, 2015): 46.

³² For more on the sculptures and other works, see I. Bol'shakov, *Vsemirnyi Smotr: Uspekh SSSR na vsemirnoi vystavke v bryussele* (Moscow: Izvestiya, 1959), 14-20. Each statue measured almost 4.5 meters in height. The inscriptions on the podiums were excerpts from the Soviet Constitution.

farmer) in the manner of classical allegories. Removed from the exterior and displayed on podiums, they were closer to “bourgeois” museum exhibits than to revolutionary agitprop.³³ This was a “domesticated” version of Socialist Realism, which demonstrates that Khrushchev’s Thaw did not purge Soviet society from Stalinist artistic forms, as it is often thought, but instead contributed to their mummification.

The only sign of artistic reform in the pavilion were the two mural-sized oil paintings by Aleksandr Deineka that flanked the entrance [Fig. 4.25-4.26]. Deineka had always been committed to figuration, yet had a reluctant if not tenuous relationship with mainstream Socialist Realism, and was thus marginalized during the height of Stalinism.³⁴ Within the context of the Thaw (and in response to the incursion of Western art in the Soviet Union, symbolized by the Picasso retrospective held in Moscow in 1956), Deineka became the emblematic “modern” Soviet artist that expressed the new, post-Stalinist era.³⁵ His prominence in Brussels, where many of his paintings were also included in the aforementioned “Fifty Years of Modern Art” exhibition, was both a sign of his rehabilitation and a symbolic connection to the 1937 Soviet Pavilion in Paris, where Deineka had painted a large mural. The first Brussels painting, entitled *Za mir* (For Peace) depicted demonstrators of various ethnicities, holding banners with the word “peace” in different languages [Fig. 4.25]. In the background was again one of the Stalinist *vysocki*, a form of architecture that had fallen from grace within the Soviet architectural establishment at the time, yet still functioned as a potent symbol of Soviet power. If the pavilion

³³ In 1957, Guy Debord deemed Soviet Socialist Realism as a revival of nineteenth-century bourgeois culture, which he thus found as abhorrent as the bourgeois culture of the West. See “Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l’organisation de l’action de la tendance situationniste international” in Gérard Berreby, *Textes et documents situationnistes: 1957-1960* (Paris: Allia, 2004), 8.

³⁴ See Christina Kiaer, “Aleksandr Deineka: A One-Man Biography of Soviet Art,” in *Aleksandr Deineka (1899-1969): An Avant-Garde for the Proletariat* (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2014), 64.

³⁵ The watershed moment was his 1957 solo exhibition in Moscow, the first since 1936. See Kiaer, *ibid.*, 66.

itself was a concrete manifestation of de-Stalinization, the ghostly apparition of Stalinist architecture on the painting within it was a poignant reminder of Stalinism's persistence in Soviet culture.

Architecture was also the subject of the pendant painting, *Mirnoe stroitel'stvo* (Peaceful Construction) [Fig. 4.26]. This time, the focus was on the process of construction, in what can be seen as a continuation of the iconography of the building site that had been popular since the 1930s.³⁶ Yet this was an updated version of that image, since it emphasized mechanization and prefabrication and thus pointed to the future of Soviet architecture, along the lines laid out by the recent decrees. Still, the depiction of such a “modern” construction site in the traditional medium of painting, suspended on a wall with dark marble revetment in an otherwise prefabricated pavilion of glass and steel shows that the oscillation between Stalinist and post-Stalinist aesthetics was still ongoing. Such mixture of “old” and “new” architecture could also be found in the exhibit on Soviet culture on the upper level. There, models and drawings from Komsomolskaya metro station, the apogee of “Stalinist Baroque,” were shown along the new, prefabricated housing of Novye Cheremushki, which was rid of “excesses,” as stipulated by Khrushchev's decrees.³⁷ On the other hand, the art section nearby contained Socialist Realist painting and sculpture, often by very ardent Stalinist artists such as Aleksandr Gerasimov. With paintings closely hung together against a dark-colored wall (in the manner of a nineteenth-century *salon*) and with sculptures arranged on tall podiums, the art display was quite academic, if not outrightly bourgeois [Fig. 4.27]. Significantly, a small-scale model of Mukhina's 1937 sculpture from Paris was also on display, which reflected its growing iconic status, but also

³⁶ See the discussion of socialist construction sites in Chapter Two.

³⁷ Bol'shakov, *ibid.*, 21.

converted it from a monumental work of agit-prop into a regular gallery exhibit, thus (perhaps inadvertently) continuing the process of “domesticating” the iconic *Rabochii i Kolkhoznitsa*.³⁸

Examined as a whole, the Soviet pavilion in Brussels is a poignant image of Khrushchev’s Thaw. Its skin of steel and glass, much lauded as an example of the new architecture, encased an exhibition that was still Stalinist at its core. This paradoxical mix of Stalinist aesthetics and Khrushchevist technocracy, represented in the disjunction between the pavilion’s art and its architecture, would define Soviet culture for decades to come. This was palpable to some at the time, including Ilya Ehrenburg. When interviewed by Belgian journalists at the Expo, he seemed disappointed by the artworks in the Soviet pavilion, stating that they did not represent accurately the current status of Soviet art.³⁹ Yet he did defend the Soviet emphasis on classical art forms, stating that Soviet culture should not be seen as separate from Western culture, since they both share an origin in ancient Greece.⁴⁰ Not everybody saw the Soviet pavilion as a dematerialized Parthenon; an American critic of the time compared it to a “giant refrigerator.”⁴¹ This comment, reflecting the Cold War antagonism and perhaps even the American fixation on consumer goods, appears even more ironic today, as this refrigerator marked the apex of the eventually incomplete Soviet Thaw.

The Multi-Media Synthesis of the Unrealized Polish Pavilion

The intended location for the unrealized pavilion of the People’s Republic of Poland was next to that of the Soviet Union, which would thus constitute a “bloc” within the exhibition

³⁸ See also the many references to Mukhina’s sculpture at the 1954 conference on the synthesis of the arts in Moscow, Chapter One.

³⁹ “Les impressions d’Ilya Ehrenburg,” *Le Soir*, May 29 1958.

⁴⁰ For Ehrenburg, communist culture was more “Western” than christian culture: “One should not forget that Christ was born further to the east than Karl Marx,” he told the Belgian journalists.

⁴¹ Kint, 245.

grounds. Yet had the pavilion not been shelved by the Polish commissioning authorities, this bloc would have been one of stark dissonance: against the somber classicism of the Soviets, the Polish project was one of the most novel structures proposed at the fair. It emerged out of the creative environment of the Art and Research Workshops at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts and was therefore a collective effort by its members.⁴² The building, which bore the codename BX-58, was designed by Jerzy Sołtan, the project leader, along with Zbigniew Ihnatowicz. Its main feature was an expansive roof made of modular prismatic trusses that were developed by the artist-engineer Lech Tomaszewski through a series of structural experiments at the Warsaw Institute for Research in Construction [Fig. 4.28-4.29].⁴³ It would cover most of the allotted plot, including all the existing trees that would be left intact and thus form an integral part of the exhibition [Fig. 4.30].⁴⁴

Along the long side of the triangular plot, an undulating wall with large, irregular openings on its base that allowed free circulation, featured two murals by Wojciech Fangor: an abstract one consisting of linear patterns on the exterior, and a figurative one on the interior [Fig. 4.31-4.34].⁴⁵ The latter depicted the history of postwar Poland, progressing from left to right and

⁴² On the pavilion, see Jola Gola, "BX 58: Le projet inabouti du pavillon polonais," in *L'architecture moderne à l'Expo 58: "Pour un monde plus humain,"* ed. Rika Devos, Mil De Kooning and Geert Bekaert (Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 2006): 307-17; Jola Gola, *Jerzy Sołtan: A Monograph*, 168-79; Aleksandra Kędziołek, "Jerzy Sołtan and the Art and Research Unit's Project for the Polish Pavilion at Expo 58," in *Team 10 East: Revisionist Architecture in Real Existing Modernism*, ed. Łukasz Stanek (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2014): 109-114; Jerzy Sołtan, "Bruksela 1958," *Architektura 2* (March-April 1957): 34-45.

⁴³ Tomaszewski's system bears many similarities to that developed by Konrad Wachsmann at about the same time, although his created a more varied visual effect, due to the use of bars of different thicknesses.

⁴⁴ This solution might have emerged from the stipulations of the Belgian organizers, who asked that foreign pavilions try to preserve as many trees as possible. By including all the trees under its roof, the Polish pavilion could thus maximize the usage of the allocated plot. See Aleksandra Kędziołek, "Jerzy Sołtan and the Art and Research Unit's Project for the Polish Pavilion at Expo 58," in Łukasz Stanek, ed., *Team 10 East: Revisionist Architecture in Real Existing Modernism* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 109.

⁴⁵ Fangor was a teacher at the Academy of Fine Arts at the time, and was also a member of ARW. He had produced many iconic images of Socialist Realism

rendered in a style inspired by cave paintings [Fig. 4.34]. First, stick figures fight and kill each other, in a clear reference to the Second World War. Then, a sole standing figure raises a hammer and sickle, signifying the establishment of communism in the country. This leads to the next scene, which focuses on postwar reconstruction and depicts the same stick figures using tools and working together to construct a building: a stylized version of the construction site iconography that had been so prominent during the early 1950s.⁴⁶ The theme of collaboration carries on to the next scene, where three figures are forging iron together around an anvil. Up to this point, the mural consisted of stylized rendition of all the major themes of postwar Socialist Realism: war and resistance, the foundation of communism, reconstruction and industrialization. Yet the remainder of the mural assumes a more playful tone, perhaps implying the new era of freedom that dawned with the Thaw. An oversize attenuated figure appears to be flying under a bright sun, followed by a scene of play and another flying figure. The final scene is, once again, one of collaboration: a figure holding an architect's compass points to a globe, which is now part of a quasi-cubist composition of straight lines and curves, held together by a group of figures.

This final scene appears to represent the synthesis of the arts, with an architect leading a collective effort at shaping the world through different means. It also signifies a change in the nature of collectivity within socialist society, as the emphasis shifts from labor to leisure and creativity. The mural's references to prehistory and cave painting give it a primordial, universally human character that is in accordance with the Expo's theme. On the other hand, this major feature of the Polish pavilion transmits a clear historical message: after the destruction of the war and the hard work that ensued during the early years of socialism, a new era of freedom and collective creation was dawning in the country. The pavilion itself was thus a

⁴⁶ See *Socialist Renaissance*, chapter 2.

product of this new civilization: it involved not only the collaboration between architects and artists, but also people of many other skills. One of them was the composer and conductor Stanisław Skrowaczewski, a pioneer of Polish experimental music at the time, who composed a score that would accompany the exhibition.⁴⁷ The version of synthesis proposed by Poland at the fair was distinctly multi-media: a key feature of the exhibition were four curved screens, suspended from the roof, onto which experimental films would be projected, selected by Ludwik Perski [Fig. 4.35].⁴⁸

Against the norm of world fairs, the display inside the pavilion was intended to be very sparse, if not immaterial: the mural, the music and the screens were the most salient features, displacing the commodities and machinery that were otherwise commonplace. This radical approach was not just due to the whimsy of the creative team, but was also part of the competition brief for the pavilion, co-edited by the Association of Polish Architects and the Union of Polish Visual Artists in early 1956:

The exhibition should make use of dynamic means, and appeal to the imagination. Thus, no texts, but a *plastic* exhibition including models, large moving machines, all including the maximum usage of cinema, sound, and lighting effects. [...] The Polish pavilion should rely on the most modern materials and construction methods, as well as aesthetics.⁴⁹

This official embrace of experimentation, as well as the final selection of such a project through formal procedures to represent the People's Republic of Poland, appears surprising today. Yet it was in reformist Poland that such a daring structure was possible. The Brussels pavilion was the culmination of a sustained engagement with the design of temporary pavilions and exhibitions by

⁴⁷ Other members of the interdisciplinary team were Tadeusz Babicz, who was responsible for the color scheme and the lighting, as well as other members of the Polish neo-avant-garde such as Jan Hempel and Henryk Marconi. See Gola, "BX-58."

⁴⁸ Kędziorek, 111.

⁴⁹ Brief jointly by the Union of Polish Visual Artists (Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków – ZPAP) and the Association of Polish Architects (Stowarzyszenie Architektów Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej – SARP), cited by Gola, "BX-58," 309. Emphasis mine.

the most progressive artists and architects of the country, already since Stalinism.⁵⁰ As a result of the political changes of 1956, this activity moved from the margins to the very center of Polish artistic life. Unlike the pavilion of the USSR, where the awkward synthesis reflected the controlled, hesitant Thaw of the country, the Polish pavilion was a product of sudden, precipitous liberalizations that released creative forces that had been held in check during the Socialist Realist interlude of 1948-1955.

In most of the other pavilions at the fair, art was employed as an afterthought, as an embellishment to trade shows organized by chambers of commerce and other bureaucratic bodies. In contrast, the Polish pavilion had been conceived as an art project from the beginning. At the same time, this was a sort of manifesto for the new form of synthesis that emerged in the country after 1956, where the old collectivism between artists and architects was transformed into an interdisciplinary practice that straddled these fields. The boundaries between art, architecture and media was blurred to an extent unseen at the fair, with the exception of the aforementioned Philips pavilion. Decades later, in light of art's move beyond medium specificity, the Polish pavilion was reclaimed as one of the first instances of an immersive "environment" in Polish art.⁵¹

The pavilion's status as a manifesto was arguably bolstered by the fact that it was never built. As the project's design progressed, it entered on a collision course with the governing bodies that had initially allowed it to come into existence. A series of heated debates arose within the organizing committee in October 1956, where members of the planning bureau (a government agency) questioned how the pavilion reflected Polish identity or the particularities of

⁵⁰ See Chapter Two, the discussion of Sołtan's and Hansen's activities in exhibition design during the 1950s.

⁵¹ See the discussion of Polish "environments" in the 1970s in the Conclusion.

Polish communism.⁵² Finally, the country's political leadership deemed the project frivolous given the country's dire financial situation, and work finally ceased in February 1957.⁵³ The chair of the planning committee stated that "we should not show to the world a construction that is inspired by grandiose folly."⁵⁴ In an effort to revive the project, Sołtan proposed a revised version of the project in July 1958, under the name BRU-58.⁵⁵ Fangor's mural was omitted, the overall area was reduced, and more floor space was allocated to more conventional, physical exhibits. Still, the curved screens were retained, as was Tomaszewski's roof. This could not salvage the pavilion, which remained unrealized. Soon thereafter, some members of the creative team emigrated, such as Sołtan and Skrowaczewski, who went on to have successful careers in the US. As for the pavilion, it eventually became legendary, both in histories of Polish architecture and the Brussels expo.⁵⁶ Today, it is also the only unrealized pavilion whose model is displayed in the permanent exhibition on the Expo housed inside the Atomium. In both contexts it is seen as an example of the playful, experimental culture that surrounded the Expo; yet, most importantly, it was the most emblematic product of a the political and artistic project of the Polish Thaw, whose trajectory it mirrored: both began with great fervor in 1956, yet quickly dissipated only a few years later. While the idiosyncratic mix of Stalinism and modernism of the Soviet pavilion embodies Khrushchev's incomplete Thaw, the Polish pavilion reflects an alternative path within the culture of postwar socialism. With its commitment to innovation and experimentation at the expense of its final realization, the project represents the utopian impulses

⁵² Arhiwum Akt Nowych, Sygnatura 14, Stenographs of discussion of the artistic-technical commission, 2/10/1956.

⁵³ Kędziorek 113, Gola, 310.

⁵⁴ Gola, 310.

⁵⁵ Jerzy Sołtan, "BX-58 – BRU-58: Projekt pawilonu wystawowego w Brukseli," *Architektura* (August 1957): 285-293.

⁵⁶ See Devos, De Kooning and Beekart, *L'architecture moderne à l'Expo 58*; Stanek, ed., *Team 10 East*.

of a “communism with a human face” that would soon be subsumed within an increasingly stagnant official culture of the People’s Republic of Poland from the 1960s onwards.

Yugoslavia: Moderate Modernism

Vjenceslav Richter’s design for the Yugoslav pavilion began in a way similar to the Polish project: as a daring design that prevailed in a national competition in 1956. As previously discussed, the initial version of the project featured a large central mast, from which the entire structure was suspended – what Richter called “foundations in the air” [Fig. 3.32]. Shortly after the competition, structural engineers raised concerns about the feasibility of the project, which Richter strongly contended.⁵⁷ He was so committed to his initial idea that he personally paid engineers to verify its viability: despite their claim that the suspension could be accomplished with only a slight increase in the budget, the committee responsible for the project insisted on a more conventional structure. Richter eventually complied, and converted his design so that the pavilion would be raised on slender supports that, recessed from the façade, would retain some of the sense of levitation of the initial project [Fig. 4.36].

This compromise is significant in many ways. Although the pavilion had its roots in the neo-constructivist activity of EXAT-51 and Richter’s own utopian ideas, both the architect and the commissariat involved were deeply committed to the project’s final realization. The Yugoslav neo-avant-garde’s insistence on operating in “real space,” as discussed in the previous chapter, was definitely a critical factor for the project’s survival: Richter eventually did whatever it took for his project to reach fruition, while retaining as many elements as possible from the

⁵⁷ Vladimir Kulić, “An Avant-Garde Architecture for an Avant-Garde Socialism: Yugoslavia at Expo ’58,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 47, no. 1 (January 2012): 170; Mil De Kooning, “La Navette spatiale de Vjenceslav Richter: Le pavillon yougoslave,” in *L’architecture moderne à l’Expo 58*, 288-305.

original design. At the same time, the bureaucratic apparatus behind the project never reached the level of hostility that the Polish pavilion faced soon after it was proposed. In Poland, Sołtan's project was eventually seen as fundamentally incompatible with socialism: it was deemed as an idiosyncratic folly of a small group of people, incapable of expressing the ideas of Polish socialism as a whole. In Yugoslavia, on the other hand, the authorities did not question the country's modernity, or even its experimental nature, as evidenced by the *sui generis* system of self-management, implemented in 1950. As architectural historian Vladimir Kulić has suggested, the country was to be represented by an avant-garde architecture that was appropriate for an avant-garde form of socialism.⁵⁸

The realized building might not have been the radical avant-garde gesture that Richter had hoped for, but it was definitely a confident statement about the country's modernity. Yugoslavia was symbolically and physically close to the West at the Expo, despite its socialist system: its location on the Expo grounds was far from the Soviet Union and its satellites (Hungary and Czechoslovakia) and in the company of Western European pavilions, such as those of West Germany, Great Britain, Spain, Portugal and Switzerland. Richter's architecture generally met great acclaim in the Western press, and it was often singled out as one of the most successful designs at the fair by publications such as the British *Architectural Review*.⁵⁹

The pavilion consisted of two interlocking levels raised on *pilotis*, each with a slightly slanted roof bearing large semicircular skylights that varied the building's silhouette under different viewpoints. Although mostly relying on steel, glass and aluminum, the pavilion also featured natural materials, such as the wooden parquet floors and revetments of Dalmatian stone.

⁵⁸ Kulić, *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Yugoslavia won one of the gold medals of the Expo, mostly due to its architecture. See Kulić, *ibid.*, 181. For a full list of reviews, see Jasna Galjer, *Expo 58 and the Yugoslav pavilion by Vjenceslav Richter* (Zagreb: Horetzky, 2009), 502-519.

Its light-filled interior was organized along split levels connected with staircases according to an open plan that allowed the free circulation of the public [Fig. 4.37]. The exhibit inside, determined by a committee mostly consisting officials from institutions such as chambers of commerce, was organized along four thematic units: State and Social Organization, which mostly comprised texts and photomurals that extolled the system of self-management; Economy, which focused on industrial and agricultural production and included machinery; Tourism, Yugoslavia's newest industry, which showcased photomurals of the country along with historical artifacts; and, finally, Contemporary Art. In what was perhaps a literal interpretation of Marxist theory, the machinery was put in the basement and the art on the top floor – thus each occupying their respective places as “base” and “superstructure” in the whole edifice of socialism. Although this was probably due to practical considerations, such as the weight of the machines and the better lighting of the top floor, the symbolism was not missed back in Yugoslavia.⁶⁰

The section on contemporary art was extensive; in fact, the prominence of art inside the Yugoslav pavilion was unmatched by any other national pavilion at the fair. The abstract painter Aleksandar Srnec, a frequent collaborator of Richter in his pavilion designs from the 1940s and a co-founder of EXAT-51, curated the exhibition [Fig. 4.38]. Paintings and prints were shown in the sky-lit gallery on the top floor, while sculptures and reliefs dotted the surrounding open grounds. The selection of works ran the gamut of styles then current in Yugoslavia. Few of the works were purely abstract, such as the relief by Emil Weber on the southwest side of the plot [Fig. 4.8]. Srnec's own contribution, an outdoor mural in painted metal [Fig. 4.39], was essentially an adaptation of his abstract painting into an “applied” work that aimed at illustrating the nearby section on the country's potential for electricity exports. Still, most of the exhibited

⁶⁰ Kulić, 172.

works were figurative, albeit often heavily stylized, as exemplified by Vojin Bakić's *Bull* [Fig. 4.40]. At the time, this style was named "moderate modernism" (*umjeren modernizam*) in Yugoslavia, and essentially described a modernism that stayed clear of avant-garde experimentation and was actually rather similar to close to Western European mainstream aesthetics of the time.⁶¹ Unlike the prominence of ideologically charged works in the Soviet pavilion, few of the Yugoslav works were political, and if so, only implicitly, as seen in the sculpture *Demonstrators II* by Drago Tršar [Fig. 4.41].

The collaboration between Richter and Srnec in Brussels was perhaps the closest that EXAT-51's ideas about the synthesis of the arts, which they helped shape, came to realization. Yet this was far from their utopian ideas about abolishing the distinction between art and architecture, and contradicted their absolute commitment to abstraction as the foundation of a "total plastic synthesis." At best, the pavilion featured some abstract murals integrated into its architecture, not unlike those proposed by Groupe Espace in France or those that featured in Paul Damaz's 1956 book on the synthesis of the arts.⁶² Still, most of the art consisted of figurative, mobile works of painting and sculpture, arranged in a gallery display that was indistinguishable from equivalent "bourgeois" exhibitions in capitalist countries. The particular choice of works probably aimed at displaying the full range of Yugoslav artistic activity, in order to avoid a potentially polarizing emphasis on abstraction. Still, the synthesis of the arts represented at the pavilion contradicted much of what Richter and Srnec had stood for during the preceding years.

As Yugoslavia met with the West on the Expo grounds, Richter and Srnec entered a "real space" that was unlike the idealized, socialist space that EXAT-51's theories had envisioned.

This was a space of commerce and of ineluctable economic forces, like those that prompted

⁶¹ Kolečnik, *ibid.*, 20-21.

⁶² Paul F Damaz, *Art in European Architecture / Synthèse des arts* (New York: Reinhold, 1956). See the discussion of this book in the Introduction.

Richter to abandon his “foundations in the air.” The fate of that feature in Brussels is significant. After being scrapped from the design, Richter converted the central mast into an abstract welded sculpture that stood tall near the entrance to the pavilion [Fig. 4.8, 4.36]. It consisted of interlocking steel arches held together with tensile cables, in a repetitive arrangement that gave the impression of infinity. This was emphasized even further by the way the sculpture was often photographed: obliquely from below, so that it appears to extend to the sky [Fig. 4.42]. Frequently shown with workers climbed on it, in the process of construction, this was a potent image of a socialist country in construction. Its debt to the Soviet avant-garde is evident, not only in its abstraction and emphasis on its material, but also in the way it was photographed, reminiscent of the work of Aleksandr Rodchenko.

The sculpture thus became an afterimage of both the initial project for the pavilion and the Soviet avant-garde that had influenced it. This was arguably the symbolic equivalent of the Lenin statue inside the Soviet Pavilion: both referred to the October revolution and the origins of state socialism, which both countries sought to recapture at the time, albeit in vastly different ways. Entitled *Nada* (Hope), Richter’s sculpture was a symbol for the utopianism of his generation. Yet *Nada* was also the name of Richter’s wife (a detail often noted today), which could lead to an expressionist interpretation of the sculpture, as a personal exercise in abstract form.⁶³ Besides, this was neither art-as-architecture, nor a complete fusion of the two, as Richter had envisioned in his writings; rather, it was a metal sculpture standing in front of a modernist building, a cliché of the period not unlike those produced by the “Cold War Constructivists” Pevsner and Gabo.⁶⁴ The slender sculpture thus oscillated between two neo-avant-garde

⁶³ See, for example, *Zbirka Richter*.

⁶⁴ See discussion in previous chapter, as well as Pevsner’s sculpture for General Motors, reproduced in the 1957 Didactic Exhibition of Abstract Art in Yugoslavia.

positions: on the one hand, the revival of Constructivist forms as a utopian proposition and on the other, the taming of its politics in order to converge with the capitalist West.

It was *Nada*, then, that best represented the complex geopolitical position of Yugoslavia, more than any of the exhibits inside the pavilion. As the country was carving out its own place between East and West by leading the non-aligned movement, it also developed a form of art and architecture that stood between the official high modernism of the West and the utopian experiments of the local avant-garde like EXAT-51. At the same time, the pavilion represented a moderate position among the other pavilions of socialist Europe, between the traditionalism of the Soviet pavilion and the unfettered experimentation of the Polish one. Thus, both within the greater system of the Cold War and the narrower context of socialist Eastern Europe, the Yugoslav pavilion confidently occupied the middle ground.

Due to their ephemeral nature, the three pavilion projects examined here can serve as snapshots of the shifting political and artistic landscape of Eastern Europe at the time. The Expo's role as a site of convergence, which is often observed in the literature, also allows for the direct comparison between countries that are often indistinguishably grouped together under the widespread interpretative framework of the Cold War. A shift of focus to the growing fragmentation of socialist Eastern Europe, as well as on the frequently overlooked art within these pavilions, allows for the deeper divergences to emerge. Arguably, 1958 corresponds to a moment of greatest diversity within the socialist world, when different – if not outright irreconcilable – versions of “communism with a human face” arose. It is this political context that accounts for the vastly different pavilions of USSR, Poland and Yugoslavia.

These differences continued well beyond the duration of the Expo. The Soviet pavilion, which was initially conceived as a reusable exhibition space that would be reassembled in

Moscow, never fulfilled its destiny. It was abandoned shortly after the closing of the Expo and the Soviet authorities repeatedly failed to respond to demands from the Belgian organizers to remove it.⁶⁵ Until its demolition in 1962 by Belgian authorities, it was the only structure of the Expo other than the Atomium to remain in situ, as a stark counterpoint to the playful, glistening symbol of the expo. Richter's Yugoslav pavilion was purchased by the school board of the small Flemish town of Wevelgem, where it was reassembled shortly after the end of the Expo.⁶⁶ Stripped of its art, including its emblematic metal sculpture, it was converted to a school, a function that it still serves to this day. This is the closest it ever came to fulfilling the social aspirations of its utopian author – although, ironically, the school is a Catholic one. And as for the Polish pavilion, with its experimental poetics and ill fate, it arguably became the most apt emblem of the fleeting moment of 1956, when utopian aspirations were once again briefly possible after Stalinism – perhaps for one last time.

⁶⁵ Archives générales du Royaume de Belgique, BE-A0510 / F 1760, fonds 3209.

⁶⁶ See the school's website, <http://www.spwe.be> (accessed May 27, 2015).

CONCLUSION: THE AFTERLIVES OF SYNTHESIS, 1958-1989

While I was conducting research at the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture in Moscow, one of the archivists broke into laughter when he encountered a foreigner interested in the synthesis of the arts in the Soviet Union. He remembered how the synthesis of the arts was all that he would hear about while in architecture school in the late 1960s, a situation that changed only in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the architectural historian Selim O. Khan-Magomedov began publishing his pioneering work on the Soviet avant-garde. “Suddenly, we had Leonidov and Mel’nikov,” the archivist quipped, “so we didn’t have to talk about the synthesis of the arts any more.” As the synthesis of the arts gradually disappeared in the West in the late 1950s and 1960s, it became and remained an integral part of the official culture in the Soviet Union: large compositions in mosaic and *sgraffito* were essential components of new public buildings throughout the country until well into the 1980s. The flat, stylized figurative murals first developed in late 1950s in projects such as the Moscow Palace of the Pioneers as the “reformed,” modernized version of Stalinist synthesis, became the dominant mode for decades to come. Ubiquitous yet often overlooked today, they range in subject matter; they include overtly ideological images of Lenin, such as the one at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in Kharkiv [Fig. 5.1], as well as depictions of idealized Soviet citizens, such as the mural of athletes at the central stadium in Kiev [Fig. 5.2]. The latter is part of long series of quotations of the most famous example of the Soviet synthesis of the arts, Mukhina’s *Rabochii i Kolkhoznitsa* from 1937, this time adapted to a new medium and subject matter. Occasionally, murals were entirely

devoid of political content, as seen in the decorative composition by Aleksandr Deineka in Sochi, featuring a sailboat surrounded by fish and birds [Fig. 5.3].¹

This vast production of “monumental-decorative art” was accompanied by an incessant engagement with synthesis in the form of publications and conferences. In 1961, the third All-Union of Soviet Architects put great emphasis on the issue.² The themes of collectivism and non-hierarchical collaboration between artists and architects, already established in the 1954 conference, continued to dominate the speeches, such as the one by Aleksandr Vlasov, whose design for the Palace of the Soviets was one of the most successful in the recent competition.³ At the time, the trope of the synthesis of the arts had become so widespread, that it attracted the attention of an unknown caricaturist, who published a series of satirical drawings in a placard newspaper (*stengazeta*) [Fig. 5.4, 5.5].⁴ The first is an image of a dreary *mikroraion*, one of the newly constructed housing estate that were typical of Khrushchev’s era. With the seams of the prefabricated panels clearly visible, construction debris dotting the small free space and a miniature statue of a pioneer next to a doghouse, the drawing is entitled “Synthesis as it sometimes occurs.” This is an unambiguous criticism of the quality of the new *Khrushchoby*. Yet the drawings that follow do not put the blame on the architects or the housing authorities, but instead accuse the individualism of the artists, who fail to truly collaborate and create a synthesis of the arts that would improve the built environment. The following drawing repeats the same

¹ Although he is better known for his oil paintings, Deineka produced many murals since the 1930s, most notably the mosaics in the Mayakovskaya station of the Moscow metro. See Alessandro de Magistris, “Underground Explorations in the Synthesis of the Arts: Deineka in Moscow’s Metro,” in *Aleksandr Deineka (1899-1969): An Avant-Garde for the Proletariat* (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2014): 239-245.

² *Tretii vsesoyuznyi s’ezd sovetskikh arkhitektorov (18-20 Maya 1961): sokrashchenyi stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo literatury po stroitel’stvu, arkhitektury i stroitel’nym materialam, 1962).

³ See Chapter 1. His speech is reproduced in *ibid.*, 10-33.

⁴ The drawings were reprinted in an appendix of the conference’s proceedings, *ibid.*, 187-88. Neither the artist nor the original publication were identified.

scene, this time covered in an excessive amount of paintings, and entitled “Synthesis as envisioned by the artist;” the next one features free-standing sculptures and reliefs, depicting “Synthesis as envisioned by the sculptor.” While these images are rather cynical, the last in the series returns to the affirmative tone of official propaganda. Showing a handshake between an artist (symbolized by the palette on the cuff) and an architect (symbolized by a compass), the drawing reminds the conference participants that “synthesis means togetherness” and that “synthesis means communal work.” The drawings thus balance between supporting the official agenda for synthesis and criticizing its apparent ineffectiveness. This migration of the issue from the closed professional circles of artists and architects to popular culture demonstrates its establishment as a widespread phenomenon in the Soviet culture from the 1960s onwards.

The 1960s also saw a surge of publications on the new synthesis of the Thaw. Many, such as Georgii P. Stepanov’s *In Collaboration with Architecture (V sodruzhestve s arkhitekturoi)* from 1966, took as their starting point the Moscow Palace of the Pioneers, seen as the origin of the new, post-Stalinist synthesis they advocated.⁵ Stepanov’s publication is one of the first in the Soviet Union to expand the notion of synthesis to include industrial design, something which already took place in Poland and Yugoslavia already in 1956, as previously discussed. This lag is due to Stalinism’s original emphasis on heavy industry: although a shift towards light industry and consumer goods occurred during the Thaw, Soviet industrial design only gained true momentum in the early 1960s. This turn is evident in the pages of the journal *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo* (Decorative Art). Founded in 1957, it initially focused on monumental-decorative art, as well as traditional crafts. It was only around 1959 that the first articles on industrial design were published, which eventually became the main focus of the journal in the 1960s. A major

⁵ Georgii P. Stepanov, *V sodruzhestve s arkhitekturoi: o sinteze sovremennoi arkhitektury s prikladnym i monumental’nym iskusstvom* (Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1966).

turning point was the founding in 1962 of the All-Union Scientific Research Institute for Technical Aesthetics (*Vsesoyuznyi nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut tekhnicheskoi estetiki*, known by its initials, VNIITE), an official organ for the promotion of Soviet design.⁶ An artist who taught at the Vera Mukhina Higher School of Art and Industry in Leningrad, Stepanov was a dedicated advocate of the synthesis of the arts throughout the late Soviet era. He continued publishing on the matter until the 1980s, when he abandoned his earlier emphasis on industrial design and focused more on long historical overviews of the synthesis of the arts, from antiquity to the present, which had been a staple of discussions of synthesis already since Stalinism.⁷

The institutionalization of synthesis that many participants of the 1954 conference had called for became a reality in the early 1960s. In 1962, a section on the synthesis of the arts was permanently founded within the Union of Soviet Architects, which held regular meetings.⁸ A report issued by the section on June 1st 1965 began by stating: “Nowadays the synthesis between monumental-decorative arts and architecture is one of the most important means of ideological and artistic expression in the new urban ensembles and complexes.”⁹ Continuing the themes established in earlier conferences, the report also suggested several steps for the expansion of synthesis in the Soviet Union, such as the founding of dedicated departments within art academies that would train specialized “artists-monumentalists” (*khudozhniki-monumentalisty*).

⁶ Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, VNIITE was transformed into the All-Russian Scientific Research Institute for Technical Aesthetics (under the same initials) and continued its activities until its final closing in 2013. See the Russian monograph, M. M. Kalinicheva, E. V. Zherdev and A. I. Novikov, *Nauchnaya shkola ergodizaina VNIITE: predposylki, istoki, tendentsii stanovleniya: monografiya* (Moscow: VNIITE, 2009). For some aspects of VNIITE’s work, see Tom Cubbin, “The Domestic Information Machine: Futurological experiments in the Soviet domestic interior, 1968-76,” *Home Cultures* 11, no. 1 (2014): 5-32.

⁷ Exemplary in this respect is Georgii P. Stepanov, *Kompozitsionnye problemy sinteza iskusstv* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1984).

⁸ The documents pertaining to the section are held at Russian Archives of Art and Literature (RGALI), 694/5/1400. Prominent Soviet architects such as Nikolai Kolli and Aleksandr Vlasov were active members of the section, often delivering lectures on the synthesis of the arts. See RGALI 674/4/48.

⁹ RGALI 674/5/1396.

Finally, the report observed a rise in the popularity of synthesis, not only in the USSR, but also abroad – yet only listed Soviet examples, such as the Moscow Palace of the Pioneers and the State Kremlin Palace.

The resurgence of synthesis abroad that was suggested by the report most probably did not refer to Western capitalist countries, where it had long fallen out of favor.¹⁰ One of the possible references was Latin America, where, as previously discussed, the synthesis of the arts reached its apex in the vast art programs at the new university campuses in Caracas and Mexico City. The latter was the subject of an extended essay in an edited volume on the synthesis of the arts, published in the series *Issues of Contemporary Architecture (Voprosy sovremennoi arkhitektury)* by the Soviet Institute of Art History, which otherwise focused solely on the Soviet Union.¹¹ Still, what the report was probably pointing at was the establishment of synthesis as a key component of official visual culture in the socialist countries, as we saw in the Palace of the Federal Executive Council of Yugoslavia.

Starting in the late 1960s and continuing through the early 1980s, annual conferences on the synthesis of the arts were jointly organized by the Union of Soviet Architects and the Union of Soviet Artists in Moscow.¹² These were essentially repetitions of the 1954 conference, organized by the same official bodies, in the same space. Yet unlike the initial iteration which only involved participants from the Soviet Union, in the conferences of the 1970s a great number of delegates from other socialist countries were present, thus forming a sort of “international” of

¹⁰ See the discussion on the Western writings on synthesis in the 1960s in the introduction.

¹¹ N. A. Evsina, “Universitetskii gorodok v Meksike,” in *Voprosy sovremennoi arkhitektury, sbornik 2: sintez iskusstv v arkhitekture* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo literatury po stroitel'stvu, arkhitekture i stroitel'nym materialam, 1963): 193-220.

¹² Many reports of the conference discussions appeared in the specialized Soviet press. See for example: Y. Korolyov, “Sintez iskusstv: vazhnaya gosudarstvennaya zadacha,” *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo* 188 (July 1973): 2-3; S. Valerius, “K probleme sinteza izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv v sotsialisticheskom gorode,” *Iskusstvo* 8 (August 1973): 22-8; S. Bazaz'yants, “Skul'ptura v ansamble goroda,” *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo* 3 (March 1976): 2-7.

synthesis. In the 1978 conference, among delegates from Mongolia, Bulgaria, Romania, Laos, East Germany and other countries, was none other than Vjenceslav Richter, who represented Yugoslavia.¹³ Entitled “Architecture and Visual Art in the Formation of the Environment of the Socialist Society (Some Yugoslav Experiences),” Richter’s lecture began by extolling the Yugoslav system of self-management, which he presented as the most advanced development within socialism.¹⁴ Once again, more than twenty years after first writing about his ideas on “the synthesis of art and life,” Richter reiterated his belief that art and architecture are building blocks of socialism: “Architecture and the visual arts, as part of this complex culture [of socialism], are beginning to gradually affect the social environment in a way that allows the possibility that, in the long run, they will play a crucial role in the formation of a self-managed socialist society.”¹⁵ He then relayed some of the recent developments in the synthesis of the arts in his country, such as a series of symposia on the matter held in the small Serbian town of Vnjačka Banja in 1973, 1975 and 1978.¹⁶ Richter stressed the role that he and EXAT-51 played in the popularization of synthesis in the country, implying that such developments in the 1970s were a direct continuation of his activities in the 1950s. He also cited his own 1956 essay “Prognosis on the synthesis of art and life as an expression of our era” as a pivotal moment for the discussion on synthesis in Yugoslavia.¹⁷

¹³ The conference program, along with Richter’s lecture, survives in the latter’s archive in Zagreb: Muzej Suvremene Umjetnosti, Zagreb: Zbirka Richter, F-18. Many thanks to Vladimir Kulić for pointing this to me.

¹⁴ Richter was careful to offer a caveat that his lecture was not “propaganda” for the system of self-management, which would still be contentious in certain official contexts outside of Yugoslavia. Still, the fact that he could openly present about it in Moscow shows that this is was a long way since “Titoism” and self-management were vilified as dangerous aberrations during the final years of Stalin’s reign. Ibid., 1.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 2-3.

¹⁷ See the analysis of the essay in Chapter 3.

The main focus of Richter's lecture in Moscow was his concept of "synthurbanism" (*sinturbanizam*), or synthetic urbanism. He had been continuously developing this project since 1964, when he published an essay on it in his book of the same title, where it followed the aforementioned 1956 essay on the synthesis of the arts.¹⁸ Although synthurbanism did not involve the integration of art into architecture in any obvious sense, Richter saw it as a direct continuation of his earlier ideas on synthesis: it was also a way of aesthetically transforming socialist society, now expanded to the urban scale. Synthurbanism relied on a series of megastructures in the shape of truncated pyramids (which he described as ziggurats), whose precise form slightly changed through the many years of the project's elaboration [Fig. 5.6, 5.7]. Each could house ten thousand inhabitants, would be self-sustaining (including facilities for housing, education, work and leisure) and, according to the basic principle of Yugoslav socialism, would be entirely self-managed. These independent ziggurats would then be organized in clusters surrounded by green space and sports facilities [Fig. 5.8], eventually forming a network that would expand infinitely. As architectural historians Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić have pointed out, synthurbanism shares many traits with similar projects of utopian urbanism from the time, such as those developed by Archigram in the UK, Constant Nieuwenhuys in the Netherlands, Yona Friedman in France and the Japanese metabolists such as Kishō Kurokawa.¹⁹ Much like his work on synthesis in the 1950s, Richter's radical urbanism of the 1960s and 1970s developed in conversation with the newest art and architecture in the West, yet it was always adapted to the context of socialist Yugoslavia. In his work, the megastructure

¹⁸ Vjenceslav Richter, *Sinturbanizam* (Zagreb: Mladost, 1964).

¹⁹ Vladimir Kulić and Maroje Mrduljaš, *Richter's Synthurbanism and the Expanded Field of Synthesis: Urbanism, Art, Politics*, unpublished essay, 1. Kulić and Mrduljaš describe in great detail the foreign influences on the development of synthurbanism, such as French "spatial urbanism." As they point out, synthurbanism first appears in the year 1964, which Reyner Banham later proclaimed as that of the megastructure. See Reyner Banham, *Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past* (London: Harper and Row, 1976).

became a concrete manifestation of an already extant political system, and was thus envisioned as imminently realizable.

A detailed analysis of synthurbanism lies outside the scope of this study. What is important for our discussion is the persistence of the trope of synthesis throughout Richter's later work. In its many iterations during the 1960s and 1970s, synthurbanism made no specific mention to art, yet Richter insisted on its continuity with his earlier work on the synthesis of the arts, which was also made evident by the project's name. His *Sinturbanizam* monograph from 1964, which contained both his major essay on synthesis and his first formulation of synturbanism, appears disjointed today. The book performs a sort of jump-cut between the 1956 and 1964, and between two different subjects and modes of writing: the essay on synthesis is long, theoretical and with few specific propositions for what such a synthesis would look like. On the other hand, the essay on synthurbanism is concise, concrete and replete with specific technical drawings: Richter clearly envisioned it as a first blueprint for a synthurbanist city. In his brief preface to the volume, he stated that many of his ideas had changed over the nearly ten years that separated the two essays: "my ideas about the synthesis of the arts have outgrown the framework of art and have encompassed the entire sphere of life."²⁰ Perhaps the "synthesis of art and life" that he had predicted in 1956 was then attained: synthurbanism did away with art, yet preserved the notion of synthesis as a cipher for the aesthetics of socialism, which gradually lost its precise meaning, only to gain in symbolic resonance.²¹ This was the only connecting thread

²⁰ Richter, *Sinturbanizam*, 11.

²¹ Larry Busbea has argued that French utopian urbanism of the 1960s continued certain aspects of the 1950s discussions on the synthesis of the arts: he interprets the 1960s emphasis on "integration" (ie. aesthetics and technology) as a transformation and adaptation earlier ideas of synthesis. See Larry Busbea, *Topologies: The Urban Utopia in France, 1960-1970* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 332-342. Still, Richter's case is unique, not only because of his insistence on the original term of synthesis, but also by the fact that he was engaged in both the 1950s synthesis and the 1960s urbanism. Although there is a rhetorical continuity between them, French advocates of synthesis such as André Bloc and the

between Richter's radical urbanism and the context of the Moscow conference in 1978. His infinite network of self-managed ziggurats had little in common with the reliefs and mosaics on facades of public buildings, which still constituted the main focus of Soviet discussions on the synthesis of the arts. Synthesis, in other words, remained synonymous with socialist aesthetics for decades to come, despite the vastly different definitions and practices of socialism that coexisted following the political transformations of the 1950s.

And while Richter's unwavering utopianism and commitment to the socialist project brought him to Moscow, his ambition and persistent focus on Western art took synthurbanism to a seemingly unlikely place: Buffalo, New York. Drawings and models from Richter's project were exhibited at the Albright-Knox gallery in 1968, as part of the exhibition *Plus by Minus: Today's Half-Century*, curated by Douglas MacAgy.²² The exhibition focused on geometrical abstraction from both the prewar European avant-gardes and the recent art from the US and Europe. As stated by the curator in the catalogue, one of the explicit aims of the exhibition was to bring these two bodies of work into dialogue with each other.²³ Thus, works by Kazimir Malevich, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy were exhibited alongside those by Donald Judd, Frank Stella, and the French Groupe de recherche d'art visuel (GRAV).²⁴ In the catalogue, Richter's work, the only architectural project in the exhibition, was paired with another figure who worked in the intersection between art and architecture in the prewar period: Theo van Doesburg [Fig. 5.9]. Underneath one of van Doesburg's Space-Time Constructions –

Groupe Espace are vastly different from radical urbanists such as Yona Friedman and other members of the Groupe Internationale d'Architecture Prospective.

²² Douglas MacAgy, *Plus by Minus: Today's Half-Century* (Buffalo, NY: Albright-Knox Gallery, 1968). Richter's work was well received in the US reviews of the exhibition. See Kulić and Mrduljaš, 19-20.

²³ *Plus by Minus*, unpaginated.

²⁴ One of the most salient features of the exhibition was the reconstruction of Lyubov Popova's stage set for Vsevolod Meyerhol'd's production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, which was also featured on the catalogue cover.

axonometric explorations of space that implied a potential application in architecture – is a cross-section of one of synthurbanism’s ziggurats. Although both images relate to utopian visions, Richter’s drawing seeks to emphasize its potential for realization by assuming the traits of a technical drawing, complete with structural details. The caption in the catalogue reads “Many of [Richter’s] formal studies, which he calls ‘instruments,’ could pass to the innocent as pure constructions, but their drill is obvious in plans for utilitarian structures. [...] Such a proposition implies a way of life with a fairly well-defined ideology.”²⁵ This well-defined ideology (ie. state socialism that, in the context of the Cold War, is not mentioned by name) is what allowed synthurbanism to operate as a concrete architectural proposition. Yet removed from it inside an American gallery and surrounded by works of “pure” art, Richter’s project became another gallery work, contradicting the architect’s commitment to “exceed the framework of art” and reversing the course of synthesis that he had embarked on more than fifteen years prior. In this regard, it is significant that the name “synthurbanism” does not appear in the catalogue of the exhibition.

Despite expressing disdain for galleries and exhibitions in his 1956 essay on synthesis (“Exhibitions of painting and sculpture, from the point of view of synthesis and of man’s living, everyday contact with art, constitute the biggest nonsense”), Richter’s career during the 1960s and 1970s increasingly relied on them.²⁶ He eventually became better known as an abstract sculptor, through his involvement in the *New Tendencies (Nove Tendencije)* movement, which began with an exhibition of the same name organized by Yugoslav critic Matko Meštrović in Zagreb in 1961 and continued until 1973.²⁷ Many former EXAT-51 members, such as Ivan

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Richter, *Sinturbanizam*, 17.

²⁷ New Tendencies grouped a wide range of practices within geometric abstraction, which ranged from more conventional painting and sculpture to kinetic environments, as well as some early experiments in

Picelj, Aleksandar Srnec, Vlado Kristl and others were involved in *New Tendencies*, which is thus usually seen as a continuation of EXAT-51.²⁸ Richter exhibited in *New Tendencies 2* in Zagreb (1963) and all subsequent iterations until 1973, as well as the exhibitions of the group in Venice (1963), Leverkusen (1964) and Paris (1964).²⁹ After that he gained international prominence and exhibited at the Sao Paulo Biennale in 1965, and participated in a group exhibition at the Guggenheim museum in New York in 1967, which led to his inclusion in the Albright-Knox exhibition in the following year. His work of the period mostly consisted of abstract metal sculptures, entitled *Reliefometers* [Fig. 5.10]. They comprised small prismatic aluminum modules arranged on a grid, interconnected with grooves in a way that allowed the creation of infinite relief patterns, like a three-dimensional digital screen. Richter often referred to them as “systemic sculpture,” whereby the relief’s final form was limited by a predetermined set of conditions, such as the size of the modules and the grid.³⁰

Richter often underlined the connection between the grids and modules of his “systemic sculptures” and the different levels of organization within synthurbanism (ziggurat, cluster, network), which he occasionally termed “systemic architecture.”³¹ Still, this was not the complete fusion of art and architecture he had prophesized in 1956. His oeuvre in the 1960s and 1970s in fact developed in the opposite direction: towards the production of autonomous, gallery-bound art objects that affirmed medium specificity rather than abolishing it, and at the

computer-generated art in the early 1970s. The most detailed account of the movement in English is Margit Rosen, Peter Weibel, Darko Fritz, and Marija Gattin, *A Little Known Story About a Movement, a Magazine and the Computer's Arrival in Art: New Tendencies and Bit International, 1961-1973* (Karlsruhe: ZKM/Center for Art and Media, 2011). The most extensive recent study in Serbo-Croatian is Ješa Denegri, *Exat-51 / Nove tendencije: umjetnost konstruktivnog pristupa* (Zagreb: Horetzky, 2000).

²⁸ Eventually, many Western European groups that focused on geometric abstraction, such as ZERO, Gruppo N and Gruppo T, as well as individual artists such as François Morellet were involved in *New Tendencies*, which thus became a pan-European network.

²⁹ For a complete list of Richter’s exhibitions with *New Tendencies*, see *Zbirka Richter*, 204-205.

³⁰ Vera Horvat-Pintarić, *Vjenceslav Richter* (Zagreb: Grafički zavod Hrvatske, 1970), 34.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

same time towards an ongoing project of utopian urbanism that increasingly retreated from the “real space” that Richter had so desired in the 1950s. It is telling that the closest that synthurbanism ever came to existing in the “real,” outside of publications, was as an art project within an American gallery. Still, the resilience of Richter’s utopianism is striking, as is his ability to straddle both an active artistic career within the avant-garde circles in the West and a sustained engagement with the concept of synthesis as it survived in the official discourse of late socialism. As mentioned previously, this unique position was only made possible by Yugoslavia’s own non-aligned status during the late Cold War, when the Yugoslav passport famously allowed its holder to travel to both Moscow and New York with the same ease – unless they were blacklisted by the Yugoslav secret police.

Yugoslavia was arguably the only place where such continuous oscillation between East and West, as well as between a synthesis “in real space” and the production of autonomous art objects for exhibitions, was possible to such extent. In contrast, in Poland the tensions between the avant-garde practices of the Thaw and the official culture had already reached a breaking point around 1958, as evidenced by the scrapping of the project for the Polish pavilion at the Brussels Expo. The early 1960s saw a retraction of many of the liberties that were introduced in 1956, which in turn deepened the division between the official and unofficial tiers of culture – as was the case for most other Soviet satellite states. The legacy of synthesis of the 1950s in Poland consequently progressed in two separate directions during the 1960s and 1970s. On the one hand, the production of reliefs and murals in public buildings continued unabated in a manner similar to the USSR. On the other hand, the aforementioned experiments in interdisciplinary collaboration centered at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts and the Art and Research Workshops informed much the post-medium-specific practices in the country, as analyzed in

Chapter Two. It was the “synthetic” creative atmosphere of the late 1950s and the theories that straddled art and architecture, such as Hansen’s Open Form, that gave rise to the performances and installations of the ensuing decades. As the synthesis in the “real space” of society as a whole never exceeded the superficial addition of murals to architecture, more experimental efforts at combining media moved to the unofficial sphere from the 1960s onwards.³² The space occupied by these new works of the 1960s and 1970s thus did not contain the totality of society, as it had been envisioned in the 1950s, but it was an intersubjective space limited to a specific number of participants.³³

In 1976, Aleksander Wojciechowski, who in 1955 had argued for an “applied and useful art” within the context of the synthesis of the arts, published an article chronicling the emergence of environments in Polish Art.³⁴ Thus the critic who had helped push the agenda of synthesis in the country, from his 1952 endorsement of the Stalinist reliefs and mosaics at the MDM to the later activities of the Art and Research Workshops and the rise of Polish industrial design, became a vocal advocate of immersive installations in the 1970s. An example he cited was Józef Szajna’s *Reminiscences*, an expansive installation for the Polish pavilion at the 1970 Venice

³² This unofficial sphere has dominated the histories of postwar Eastern European art that have been published in the last two decades, often at the risk of overlooking interconnections between official and unofficial culture, or presuming that the division between the two had been constant. See, for example, Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989* (London: Reaktion, 2009).

³³ Such intersubjective conception of space has been the focus of Grzegorz Kowalski’s curriculum at the Warsaw Academy of Fine arts since the 1970s. Kowalski, a student of Hansen’s, adapted his teacher’s theory of the Open Form for his teaching at his studio (known as the *Kowalnia*), which produced many of the leading figures of recent Polish Art, such as Artur Żmijewski, Paweł Althamer and Katarzyna Kozyra. See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 257-59; Vesna Krstich, “Push and Pull: How to Make a ‘Happening’ Classroom,” *C Magazine* 115 (Autumn 2012): 4-8.

³⁴ Aleksandr Wojciechowski, “Environment in Polish Art,” *Project* 112 (March 1976): 17-32. See also section on “Useful and Young Art” in Chapter Two. Wojciechowski used the word “environment” also in the Polish version of the article. His text was published in the art magazine *Projekt*, which was founded in 1956 and became emblematic of the new art of the Thaw. It was issued bimonthly until the 1980s, and became bilingual (Polish / English) in the 1970s.

Biennial [Fig. 5.11-5.12]. The work dealt with Szajna's memories of his internment at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp and consisted of a series of tableaux made of dirt, fragments of mannequins, accumulations of clothes, cutouts of the artist's silhouette and photographs of Holocaust victims in camp uniforms.³⁵ Wojciechowski saw a direct lineage between these immersive later works and the experiments in joining art and architecture from the 1950s. In his article he referred to many projects discussed here in Chapter Two, such as Hansen's Izmir pavilion of 1955 [Fig. 2.44-2.45], his "Choke Chain" exhibition of 1957 [Fig. 2.46-2.47], as well as the unrealized Brussels pavilion [Fig. 4.28-4.35], all of which he interpreted as the earliest manifestations of such "environment art" in Poland. Yet the critic did not touch upon a crucial difference between the 1950s and the 1970s. The earlier projects operated in public space, and thus took architecture as their starting point: even Hansen's "Choke Chain," essentially a painting exhibition inside a gallery, engaged with the building as a whole and sought to unite its interior with its exterior, by extending the metal armature beyond the strictly defined exhibition space. In contrast, the 1970s environments blurred the boundaries between different art mediums, yet they also abandoned any effort at uniting art and architecture, since they were always temporarily circumscribed inside interchangeable gallery spaces.³⁶ By retreating into the gallery, the synthetic impulses of the 1950s were thus reabsorbed into the realm of "pure" art – albeit one whose definition had significantly expanded.

³⁵ Ibid., 22. Szajna worked predominantly as a set designer: he had been the art director of the Teatr Ludowy in Cracow in the 1950s and 1960s. During the late 1960s and 1970s, he began working with standalone environments, that brought his work with set design into the gallery space. On Szajna, see Bożena Kowalska, ed., *Józef Szajna i jego świat* (Warsaw: Zachęta Gallery, 2000). On his work *Reminiscences* in particular, see *ibid.*, 31-36 and Elżbieta Morawiec and Jerzy Madeyski, *Józef Szajna (plastyka, teatr)* (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1974), 124-28.

³⁶ For example, Szajna's *Reminiscences* was shown at the Exhibition Pavilion of the Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions (BWA) in Cracow, at the Contemporary Gallery (Galeria Współczesna) in Warsaw and at the Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions in Lublin prior to its mounting at the Venice Biennale. *Ibid.*, 124.

Wojciechowski made no reference to the synthesis of the arts in his 1976 article, perhaps because by that time the term had been overdetermined by its repetition in official discourse. Yet in 1980, another article published in the same journal sought to reflect upon the legacy of synthesis more directly. Entitled “Synthesis or Integration?” it was written by Bohdan Urbanowicz, who was discussed in Chapter Two as one of the key protagonists in the discussions of synthesis in Poland during the 1950s, with his writings on the historical restoration of Warsaw, as well as his imaginative façade in the city’s New Town.³⁷ Urbanowicz wrote the text shortly before retiring from his thirty-year tenure as a professor at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, where he had worked at the intersection between art and architecture, as a painter who taught at the department of interior architecture. The article began by defining the synthesis of the arts as a phenomenon of the past: after a brief historical overview of different efforts at uniting art and architecture, from prewar movements such as De Stijl to the postwar activities of Le Corbusier, the Groupe Espace and the discussions at CIAM, Urbanowicz stated:

It is surprising how rapidly the tide had risen and how quickly it fell. It was a tide of optimism, of trust in the possible synthesis of arts. But the remnants of the period are the architectural works in Ronchamp, Assy-le-Plateau, Audincourt, Vence, La Tourette. Viewing them in retrospect, we must ask why they were erected. It seems that their role was that of the first criticism, the first blow against the sterility of modern architecture. Why did it collapse? It might have resulted from the too declarative form of collaboration or from the fact that architecture, immobile in its “modernity,” was unable to keep pace with the rapidly changing value system in the field of contemporary painting and sculpture.³⁸

³⁷ Bohdan Urbanowicz, “Synthesis or Integration?” *Projekt 135* (February 1980): 64-67. The English translation cited here appeared in the original.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 66. Urbanowicz is referring to: Le Corbusier’s Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp (1954); the Notre Dame de Toute Grâce in Assy (1937-1946), designed by Maurice Novarina and decorated by Fernand Léger, Georges Braque, Pierre Bonnard and others; the Sacré-Coeur in Audincourt (1949-1951), also by Novarina and decorated by Léger, Jean Bazaine and others; the Chapelle du Rosaire in Vence, decorated by Henri Matisse (1949-1951); and Le Corbusier’s Dominican priory of Sainte Marie de la Tourette (1956-1960). It is curious that he only focuses on French religious buildings, which were a small, albeit significant category within the many examples of the synthesis of the arts in the postwar period.

Urbanowicz rightly observed that the fascination with synthesis in the 1950s in fact belied the definitive separation between art and architecture, which he traced on the level of education, as artists and architects were formally trained according to increasingly different curricula. In this context, the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts during the 1950s was an exception, since a remarkable number of professors at the time had been trained as architects and engineers, such as Oskar Hansen, Jerzy Sołtan, Lech Tomaszewski, Zbigniew Ihnatowicz and others.³⁹ Urbanowicz deplored the departure of many of these figures from the Academy in the 1960s, which he saw as the end of the cross-departmental collaboration that brought about projects such as the Polish pavilions in Izmir and Brussels, which had also been mentioned by Wojciechowski four years prior. Yet in 1980, Urbanowicz's tone grew somewhat nostalgic: while he recognized that the era of synthesis was long gone, he sought to recapture some of the spirit of collaboration that he had encountered at the Academy in the late 1950s. Although he conceded that "the too declarative and too idealistic approach to the synthesis of visual arts could not have been and cannot be fully put into practice," he suggested the possibility for a new model of collaboration.⁴⁰ "Not synthesis, but rather, reasonable integration," he proposed, one that would not involve "total agreement, but a 'syncretic' interplay of the various factors of a single, significant task."⁴¹ By substituting "integration" for "synthesis," Urbanowicz sought to eschew the weight of a concept that by all accounts had failed, yet preserve some of the ideals that it represented, such as collectivity and the betterment of society through artistic creation.

If the synthesis of the arts had been the artistic corollary of socialism within a one-party state, as argued here, Urbanowicz's appeal for a new model of artistic collaboration that could encompass disagreement appears like a call for a democratic pluralism. It is not a coincidence

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 67.

⁴¹ Ibid.

that this last declaration in the long discussion on synthesis occurred at a time that the People's Republic of Poland was about to enter the final stage of its history. A few months after the publication of the article, on September 17, 1980, the Solidarity (*Solidarność*) trade union was founded at the Gdańsk shipyards, under the leadership of Lech Wałęsa. Independent from the ruling Worker's Party, it was the first self-governing trade union within the Soviet bloc, and its membership quickly amounted to a third of the Polish population. Its founding and meteoric rise, which eventually led to the imposition of martial law in Poland on December 13, 1981, are widely regarded today as a watershed that led to the final collapse of European state socialism in late 1989.

As the reaction of the archivist at the Shchusev Museum shows, the synthesis of the arts was all but forgotten by the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. This oblivion has continued until today: despite its omnipresence under state socialism, the concept is conspicuously absent from recent accounts of postwar art from Eastern Europe. Yet, as analyzed above, the synthesis of the arts was often the background against which much of this art developed. The retrieval proposed by this dissertation is not motivated by either a nostalgic desire to resuscitate this mode of artistic production, or the politics that engendered it. Rather, it seeks to suggest an alternative mode of art historical inquiry, one that discusses the relation of art to politics beyond the simplified positions of affirmation or opposition. The history of synthesis developed here is thus conceived as a history of the places assigned to the work of art when its status as an autonomous, gallery-bound distinct object was thrown into question. At the same time, it constitutes a methodological proposition for a new approach to the study of late modernism that seeks to undo divisions that structure the field: those between art and architecture; between the First, Second and Third

worlds of Cold War geopolitics; and between a medium-specific late modern period and the variously termed post-modern or “contemporary” period that ensued.

Many aspects of this history still await further examination. The triangulation of USSR, Poland and Yugoslavia proposed here could be enriched by other perspectives within European state socialism. Hungary and Czechoslovakia, which were also prominently present at the Brussels Expo of 1958, represent significant alternative trajectories for the development of both reformist politics and modernist aesthetics within the Eastern bloc during the 1950s. With its dramatic revolution of 1956 and subsequent “normalization” under Janos Kádár, Hungary was in many respects the political epicenter of the Thaw; Unlike Hungary and Poland, Czechoslovakia was slow to de-Stalinize its art and architecture, a delayed reaction that at the time brought it closer to the Soviet Union than to the other satellite states of Eastern Europe during the late 1950s. Both countries had deep traditions of interwar avant-gardes, and the effect of those on the emergence of the modernist idioms in the late 1950s ought to be investigated. Finally, the German Democratic Republic occupies a unique position in this history: divided by its Western counterpart by a border that was still somewhat porous, prior to the erection of the Berlin Wall, the 1950s in the country feature today in many histories of Cold War art and architecture.⁴² The task of integrating East Germany into the greater constellation of art and architecture in socialist Eastern Europe, in a manner first accomplished by Anders Åman’s work on Stalinist architecture, is still pressing.⁴³

Still, the expansion of this history to include more individual countries runs the risk of putting undue emphasis on national perspectives at a time of increasing permeability of national

⁴² Exemplary of this is Greg Castillo’s *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

⁴³ Anders Åman, *Architecture and Ideology in Eastern Europe During the Stalin Era: An Aspect of Cold War History* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992).

borders. As previously discussed, the Thaw did allow for the establishment of “national paths to communism,” yet at the same time it also catalyzed the emergence of supra-national affiliations between socialist Eastern Europe and countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America – most notably within the non-aligned movement. A significant thread of the story of postwar synthesis presented here is its relationship to similar phenomena outside of Europe and North America, which is itself worthy of a standalone study. The enthusiastic reception in Eastern Europe of Latin American efforts at synthesis discussed in Chapter 3 was complemented by an exportation of architectural knowledge from countries such as Poland and Yugoslavia to Africa, Middle East and elsewhere. Such exchanges between the Second and Third Worlds during the postwar period are finally gaining a long-deserved attention by scholars such as Łukasz Stanek.⁴⁴ The role of art in this context still remains largely overlooked, despite the omnipresence of murals and reliefs in the new public buildings erected in Baghdad, Addis Ababa, or Accra during the late 1950s and 1960s. As exemplified by the Palace of the Federal Executive Council in New Belgrade, the synthesis of the arts often operated as a local counterbalance to an increasingly international modern architecture and thus helped negotiate the challenges of the emergent globalization. The methodological approach proposed here, focusing on the relationship between art and architecture instead of the stylistic developments within distinct mediums, could provide a way to construct a more nuanced history of late modernism’s worldwide expansion, which is currently one of the most urgent tasks of the field.

Today, the murals examined here, which still dot many cities of the former Eastern bloc, are most often ignored, being little-understood relics of a long bygone era. On few occasions, they are retrieved and showcased in the context of a popular fascination with the visual culture of

⁴⁴ See Łukasz Stanek and Tom Avermaete, eds., “Cold War transfer: Architecture and Planning from Socialist Countries in the ‘Third World’,” edited issue of *The Journal of Architecture* vol. 17, no. 3, June 2012.

“mid-century” modernism. In the summer of 2015, as this dissertation was being completed, the most spectacular such retrieval unfolded. When the new Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow opened its doors on June 12, 2015 [Fig. 5.13], a large mosaic depicting an allegory of Autumn in the distinct socialist-modern style of the late Soviet era was revealed inside the new galleries [Fig. 5.14-5.15]. The museum now occupies a 1968 prefabricated pavilion in Gorky Park – not unlike the Soviet pavilion in Brussels in proportions – which had housed the cafeteria *Vremena Goda* (Four Seasons) until its abandonment in the 1990s [Fig. 5.16].⁴⁵ Left to ruin in recent years and stripped of its glass façades, the building was adapted for its new use by Rem Koolhaas and his Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), which involved the addition of new glazing in polycarbonate material. The mosaic inside, the only one that survives, was preserved in situ, along with other surface treatments of the interior walls, such as the bright green ceramic tiles.⁴⁶ In a statement published on OMA’s website, this act of preservation is presented as an antidote to the ubiquitous “white cubes” of contemporary exhibitions and would offer the curators more options beyond the conventional neutral interiors of most gallery spaces. At the same time, the surfaces are seen as precious artifacts that ought to be preserved: “Even as a ruin [the pavilion] preserves the ‘collective’ aura of the Soviet era: it is a sober public space adorned with tiles, mosaics and bricks.”⁴⁷

This ruinous state is emphasized by a photograph published on OMA’s website [Fig. 5.17]. It depicts the mosaic inside the building stripped of its windows, floors and ceilings, down to its concrete skeleton. On the foreground among the debris are several red tubes bearing the logo of Coca-Cola. Once a symbol of political change in the post-communist 1990s, when the

⁴⁵ See <http://garageccc.com/en/landing/show> (accessed August 12, 2015).

⁴⁶ See <http://www.oma.eu/projects/2015/garage-museum-of-contemporary-art/> (accessed August 12, 2015).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

logo was often juxtaposed with defunct symbols of Soviet power in press images, the Coca-Cola signs have now also become part of the ruin. This is a moment when not only communism, but also the post-communism of the 1990s is also relegated to history. The mosaic, a relic of Soviet collectivism as correctly identified by OMA, still functions like so many other murals of that time, attributing a locally specific meaning to an increasingly interchangeable “global” architecture. Part of a growing series of private museums of contemporary art designed by the world’s “starchitects” and continuously inaugurated across the globe, the new Garage Museum utilizes the mosaic as an anchor to a specific cultural and historical context. Complemented by socialist-modern furniture in the museum’s café, the mural thus becomes a fashionable oddity. Yet upon closer examination, the mosaic’s spectral reappearance is imbued with deep irony. It has found itself back inside a gallery (significantly, a privately owned one) and surrounded by mobile works-commodities – the very conditions that the socialist synthesis of the arts sought to supersede in the first place. It is a stubborn token of an era when, despite all its shortcomings, art was conceived as a public good that ought to exit the galleries and meet the people on the streets; when it was conceivable, if not imperative, to create a large, costly work of art inside a popular cafeteria frequented by regular Muscovites. In other words, it is a testament not of an idiosyncratic past style, but of a different conception of art’s place in society. Perhaps the ruin of *Vremena Goda* required more excavation prior to its spectacular restoration.

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(The print run of each journal is listed; The issues surveyed here were from 1950 to 1960 inclusive, when available)

Architektura (Warsaw), 1948-1991

Arhitektura (Zagreb), 1952-ongoing

Arkhitektura SSSR (Moscow), 1933-91

Čovjek i prostor (Zagreb), 1954-ongoing
Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR (Moscow), 1957-1991
Iskusstvo (Moscow), 1933-92
Mozaik (Belgrade), 1953-61
Ochrona Zabytków (Warsaw), 1948-ongoing
Projekt (Warsaw), 1956-1997
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