

## CRITIC'S PICK

# Daring to Create Art Freely Behind the Iron Curtain

The Walker Art Center stages a rare survey of the courageous work that bloomed in the Eastern bloc, as artists struggled against state repression.



**By Jason Farago**

Reporting from the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis

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To say what you want, to act how you want, to live and fear no reprisals: there are some rights you can start to take for granted. Liberal democracy has been having a rough ride this century, and maybe it was inevitable, as elite institutions sputtered and populist reaction mounted, that some American artists and writers would forget just why free expression matters. Why has the recent reaction to free-speech hypocrisy and misinformation, at least in some cultural sectors, been to denigrate free speech itself? From Turkey to China and India to Zimbabwe, artists still face censorship, lawsuits, imprisonment or worse for the crime of creativity; perhaps some of us are too comfortable to take it seriously.

Here at the Walker Art Center, a weighty and ambitious exhibition reorients American audiences toward a generation of artists, writers and musicians for whom free expression was no plaything and no luxury. The show is called “Multiple Realities: Experimental Art in the Eastern Bloc, 1960s — 1980s,” and it’s the most substantial survey of art from the continent’s former Communist states ever to take place in an American museum. It includes nearly 100 artists, most of whom worked in treacherous conditions and outside of state institutions, in East Berlin or Warsaw, Prague or Belgrade, Bucharest or Budapest. It’s a history lesson, yes, but an uncommonly boisterous one, chockablock with daring street performances captured on clandestine cameras, psychedelic Hungarian posters and avant-garde Czech fashion, documents of queer parties in Warsaw and punk nights in Prague, and some nifty Yugoslav computer art.



“Multiple Realities,” includes works by feminist artists, such as Ewa Partum, a performance artist and photographer in 1970s Poland. She applied makeup to half her face to appear prematurely aged; the posters on the wall read, “My problem is the problem of a woman.” Eric Mueller/Walker Art Center

Committed museumgoers will recognize a few of the artists here, such as the Croatian photographer Sanja Ivecovic and the Polish sculptor Alina Szapocznikow, who both had retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the 2010s. Quite a few more have never exhibited in this country. Some were precise and academic, but many were sly and droll. They were confined behind the Iron Curtain, except when they traveled to India and China and even (at times) the continent’s west. The only thing that really unites them all is courage: a belief that restrictions on movement, government censorship and secret police surveillance were no match for artistic freedom.

“Multiple Realities,” organized over five years by the Walker curator Pavel S. Pys and accompanied by a hefty 400-page catalog, is the kind of historical exhibition that comes along far too infrequently in our diminished museums of modern and contemporary art. (The show runs through March here and then travels to Phoenix and Vancouver.) It concentrates on five satellite states that spent the later 20th century under the thumb of Moscow — Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania — as well as the nonaligned socialist state of Yugoslavia. (The U.S.S.R. is omitted, though the war in Ukraine has brutally underscored this show’s analysis of Russian cultural imperialism.) It’s fuzzy-edged, nuanced, self-contradictory, and its pluralistic approach

to the East has both a historical and a contemporary vocation.



A video still of Akademia Ruchu, “Potknięcie (“Stumble),” 1977. Members of the Warsaw art collective suddenly stumbled over invisible objects while walking by the headquarters of the ruling party of Communist Poland. Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw

It wants, first, to refashion a narrow conception of “European” art as something principally French, German or Italian, and to pummel the enduring stereotype of the Communist East as a homogenous and isolated backwater. (Let me grumble now that the adjective “Eastern” has always been annoying and imprecise: Prague is west of Vienna, Warsaw is west of Athens.) In fact the bloc was never culturally uniform, nor was it closed to outside influences. Artists in Yugoslavia and Hungary enjoyed freedoms that Romanians and East Germans did not. And artists in Communist countries were experimenting as much as their colleagues in the NATO states — it’s just that they weren’t doing so in painting and sculpture, disciplines that the party-state regulated more heavily.

Their most persuasive work took place in domains that the regimes considered marginal, such as performances documented with black-and-white photos or small hand-held cameras. Dora Maurer, in Budapest, coated her bare feet in red paint on May Day 1971 and walked around in circles: a dissident, pointless march to her own drum

while the army paraded outside. In a video, members of the collective Akademia Ruchu, in Warsaw in 1977, ambled past propaganda posters and suddenly stumbled over some invisible object, to the bemusement of passers-by and the irritation of the party. Ivekovic, in Zagreb in 1979, sat on her apartment balcony while President Tito's motorcade went past, smoking and drinking whiskey, holding a Marxist book in her right hand and pleasuring herself with her left. (She got away with it for 18 minutes, before a police officer came to her door.)



“Poetry on Space — Cosmos,” an installation by the Slovak artist Stano Filko, initially created in 1967-1970 and reconstructed in 2008. Eric Mueller/Walker Art Center

If much of the best art of the period took place in alternative scenes and behind closed doors, there were also public outlets. Mail art, for instance, whose absurd or conceptual missives evaded the censors as it traveled west. Textile art, whose practitioners were exempted from the ideological strictures of painting or literature.

And there were chances to disturb things even inside some official institutions. Jürgen Wittdorf, a member of East Germany's ruling party, was commissioned to decorate a gymnasium in Leipzig in 1964 — and produced unmistakably homoerotic linocuts of model workers fraternizing in the showers. The avant-garde filmmaker Jozef Robakowski, in 1971, was able to produce a beautiful minimalist film — a red rectangle, pulsating and vibrating to an electronic score by Eugeniusz Rudnik — in the labs of the Polish state broadcaster.

None of this came without costs. One of the great revelations of “Multiple Realities” is Gabriele Stötzer, a photographer and performance artist who worked fearlessly in Erfurt and East Berlin: shooting punk movies on her Super 8 camera, running an illegal alternative gallery, circulating her art through the mail, and spending a year in prison after she protested the ruling party’s decision to strip a singer-songwriter of his citizenship. Stötzer stayed in East Germany even when she had the chance to defect, and in 1984 she produced a sequence of photographs of a man in drag, proudly facing the camera in stockings and high heels. She knew her model only as “Winfried” — but, after the fall of the wall, she discovered that this supposed outsider was in fact a Stasi agent. Freedom? Self-expression? These were always also images of surveillance and paranoia, and politics reached all the way into the private sphere.



Jürgen Wittdorf, a member of East Germany’s ruling party, was commissioned to decorate a gymnasium in Leipzig in 1964. His homoerotic prints were widely distributed in the Communist Youth Organization’s daily newspaper. via KVOST, Berlin

It’s that indivisibility of aesthetics and politics, of inner and outer life, that gives “Multiple Realities” its contemporary force and application. Over and over, on camera or in the concert hall, they modeled in what forms, and in what venues, artists can succeed in making visible the structures of society. Unlike their colleagues in the West, whose freedoms allowed them to make clean distinctions between “art” and “activism,”

here no easy division was admitted between dissidence and independence, between engagement and refusal. Which is why the former East is not an off-ramp from some “dominant” cultural history, and not a specialist subject either. It’s a prefiguration — of how to think, how to collaborate, and how to stay sane when the private is gone.

“We’re always selecting what we say and what we don’t,” says the narrator of “The Land of Green Plums,” the Romanian author Herta Müller’s exacting 1994 novel about dissident students tormented by both the Securitate and their own anxieties. “Why do we say one thing and not the other? And we do this instinctively, too, because no matter what we’re talking about, there’s more that doesn’t get said than does.”



Nine photographs from Gabriele Stötzer's photo series "Trans Sitzend," shot in 1984. Only after the fall of Communism did the artist learn that the model was a Stasi informant tasked to spy on her. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

That kind of state control may be over, even in illiberal Hungary. East Berlin has become the art world's Shenzhen, a low-paid back office for a global cultural industry. *Pace* Edward Snowden, there is no comparison between the surveillance of the Eastern bloc and today's ambient digital monitoring. But the selective silence of artists, writers,

intellectuals: that feels all too familiar. These artists were asking, like Müller's narrator, a question that is not at all historical: "How do you have to live, I wondered, to be in harmony with what you honestly think?"

**Multiple Realities: Experimental Art in the Eastern Bloc, 1960s — 1980s**

Through March 10 at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; [walkerart.org](http://walkerart.org).

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