

# IN THE SHADOW OF YALTA

Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe,  
1945–1989

Piotr Piotrowski





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# Introduction

This book is concerned with the art of ‘East-Central’ Europe, part of a larger geo-political formation, namely the ‘Eastern Bloc’ or ‘Eastern Europe’. The art produced in this larger area is usually referred to as ‘East European’ in the English-speaking world. I will follow that Western usage, except where I need to be more narrowly precise. So where exactly is ‘East-Central’ Europe? The term describes the territory located between the Iron Curtain and the Soviet Union. It is the part of Europe that, due to the agreement signed between the Western powers and the Soviet Union at Yalta, found itself within the latter’s sphere of influence. The Soviet Union itself, as one of the cosignatories, did not have to contend with ‘the shadow of Yalta’. That is why the art of the former USSR has not been considered in this book. Of course, besides the political factors – such as state sovereignty and a tradition of Communism that was longer by several decades – that created in Russia a system of cultural and artistic references that are completely different and impossible to compare with that of the East European countries, there are also pragmatic reasons for excluding Russian art from the present analysis. A great deal has been already written about it; there have been a number of studies, monographs and books on the subject. It is therefore a fairly well covered terrain. In contrast, East-Central Europe, understood as a region (rather than as an amalgam of the constituent countries) has remained relatively unexplored. This is especially true with respect to the art produced in the region after 1945. By contrast, the earlier period has been a subject of several important studies such as Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann’s book *Court, Cloister and City: The Art and Culture of Central Europe, 1450–1800*, Krisztina Passuth’s study of the avant-garde between 1907 and 1927, *Les avant-gardes de l’Europe Centrale*, or Steven Mansbach’s *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, 1890–1939*.<sup>1</sup> There are also several studies and anthologies with narrower scope for which the

culture of the region in the post-World War II period provides a focus. Andrzej Turowski's collection of essays, *Existe-t-il un art de l'Europe de l'Est?*, is a good example of the genre.<sup>2</sup>

In 2002 Mária Oriškova's study, *The Double Voice of Art History (Dvojhlasné dejiny umenia)*, was published in Bratislava.<sup>3</sup> The book presents an argument for the breakdown of art history as a discipline, its division into 'the history of the Western and Eastern art', or of the centre and the periphery. After discussing 'Western perspective', characterized, above all, by the lack of knowledge about 'the East', and 'the Eastern perspective', defined as an insider viewpoint on the art produced in the region and dealt with from the point of view of the local methodological paradigms committed to the distinction between the 'official' and the 'unofficial' artistic cultures, the author attempts to disrupt this art historic dichotomy. However, she does not engage in a comparative analysis of the two halves of art history, but rather represents the art of Eastern Europe as an autonomous and dynamic historic formation. Moreover, the material covered by Oriškova is considerably limited in its geographic and historic purview. She examines only Polish, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak, or rather, Czechoslovak, art, and generally focuses on the neo-avant-garde practice. She also tends to prioritize Czechoslovak art in both invoked examples and references to secondary literature. Because the experience of Czechoslovakia functions in Oriškova's book as the model for the interpretation of art of the entire region, including Poland and Hungary, her analysis necessarily produces a distorted image of the artistic practice in the region. Nevertheless, the book makes a valuable contribution to the literature, since next to the more or less disconnected exhibitions and exhibition catalogues that will be discussed in the next chapter, it is one of the first modest but nonetheless significant attempts at a cohesive formulation of the artistic experiences in this part of Europe.

In the same year, 2002, *Primary Documents*, a useful source of materials was published in English,<sup>4</sup> and a few years later the famous *East Art Map* edited by the IRWIN group from Slovenia appeared.<sup>5</sup> After this book was originally completed in Poland, many studies dealing with particular countries have also been published. Let me mention only two of them: *Impossible Histories*, where the second part is devoted to the post-World War II art in Yugoslavia,<sup>6</sup> and the multi-volume publication on modern Czech art, *Dějiny českého výtvarného umění*.<sup>7</sup>

East-Central Europe is not the old Eastern Europe, although the latter is partly contained within its borders. Looking at the region from a strictly geographic perspective, East-Central Europe covers the eastern portion of the former Central Europe. Although it does not include Austria, it encompasses

the eastern part of Germany. Without a doubt, Central European traditions played a key role in shaping the identity of the region, especially in those countries whose territories belonged to the Habsburg empire before World War I. One could generalize that East-Central Europe describes the territory that from the mid-1940s to 1989 fell under the more or less strict control of the Soviet Union under the authority of the Yalta agreement. However, its borders also contain the eastern parts of Southern Europe, or the Balkan countries such as Bulgaria or Yugoslavia, despite the fact that the leader of the latter country broke ‘friendly’ relations with the Soviet Union in 1948. It also includes Romania, a country whose dictator began in the 1970s to assert his political independence from Big Brother, a fact that did not, however, create a more liberal political climate in that country. To define the geographic and historic range of the book more precisely, I will consider art produced in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, East Germany, Poland, Romania and Hungary, or the countries of the so-called people’s democracy. I will make limited forays into Bulgaria and will entirely omit Albania as well as the Soviet Union.

Ostensibly, the subject of the book is the history of modern art, here referred to colloquially as the avant-garde. I realize that the use of this term in the title of the study is rather unusual insofar as the book charts not only the history of what is generally, especially in Anglo-linguistic literature, referred to as Modernism, but also of the neo-avant-garde and its 1980s mutations. Because of this focus, the geographic coverage of my analysis is admittedly uneven. I have spent more time on the art of those countries where the post-war experience of modern art was richer and more dynamic, less on those where it did not play a significant role. This is the main reason for excluding Albania and for giving only scant attention to Bulgaria.

The book is not intended to function as an all-inclusive monograph on the modern art of East-Central Europe. Nor does it seek to provide a comprehensive synthesis. Neither does it present a survey of the art produced in each country of the region. Instead, it offers a selective, comparative analysis of significant art historic and artistic problems. Individual issues, trends, attitudes and forms of expression are brought together and compared within appropriate time frames, creating a map of the region and an outline of its historic and geographic dynamics. Diachronic dimension is therefore established through several synchronic samples. The art itself, considered through such a synchronic lens, does not appear as an autonomous field but as a practice enmeshed in politics. Moreover, the frames provided by history are not politically identical. The Communist systems of the different countries had very different, sometimes even contrary, character and intensity. There were times when liberalization in one country occurred simultaneously with the

tightening of political controls in another. This meant that, depending on the location and political context, the same type of art could have radically different meaning and significance in different countries of the region.

After introductory remarks on the art geography, this book will offer an analysis of Surrealism in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary, the countries located at the heart of East-Central Europe. This section focuses on a very short period from the end of World War II to the introduction of tight cultural controls under Stalinism in the final years of the 1940s. The book turns next to the analysis of the post-Stalinist ‘thaw’. During this period, Modernist art appeared in the context of a system that was still totalitarian, but that was also subjected (to a greater or lesser extent) to a melting erosion. I will discuss different form of art practice through several unsystematically selected case studies – *Art informel* painting and neo-Constructivism, figurative trends and the developing art of the neo-avant-garde. Their historic and artistic reference is provided by the breakdown of socialist realism, which I do not describe in detail, but which functions as a background, a negative and traumatic point of reference for those Modernist tendencies.

The next part juxtaposes the experiences of the neo-avant-garde during the changing political climate of the 1970s, the so-called period of the real socialism, also described by Václav Havel as ‘post-totalitarianism’.<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, the character of the latter, just as of that of the ‘thaw’, was different in different countries. Nevertheless, everywhere one could observe changes leading to ideological divestment of the system, the introduction of a few elements of consumerism and, above all, the appearance of political pragmatism. Because real socialism took a different form in each country, especially concerning cultural policies, individual neo-avant-garde trends such as conceptual art or body art had different meanings in different areas of Eastern Europe. The last chapter functions as an epilogue. It describes the end of the Communist system in the region and of the art that appeared within its frame.

# 1

## The Geography and History of Art in Eastern Europe

At the beginning of the 1970s I went to Budapest, where I met László Beke, at the time the leading art critic of the East European art scene. I was still a graduate student, working part-time at the Gallery Akumulatory 2 in Poznań, run by my older friend, Polish artist Jarosław Kozłowski. I ventured into the Budapest world of contemporary art equipped with a list of Hungarian artists provided by Kozłowski, a modest assurance of support from Beke and theoretical and art historic training in contemporary art, which I received at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, mainly through a seminar taught by another friend, Andrzej Turowski, then actively involved with the Warsaw Gallery Foksal. Although I saw many similarities between the Polish and the Hungarian art scenes, what struck me most were the significant differences in the character of the two art environments. I do not remember many details of that trip, but I do recall general impressions of meetings, often taking place in very strange, clandestine locations, conducted in a quasi-conspiratorial atmosphere. This was a very different experience from that I was used to in Poland.

Back then, I was not in a position to fully notice – much less realize – the significance of those differences. Instead of paying close attention to contextual disparities, I was much more interested in finding affinities, especially on the level of art practice. But as I hitchhiked through Western Europe the following summer, I began, for the first time, to seriously consider them. Almost all of the drivers whom I encountered were convinced that the Eastern Bloc was characterized by an all-pervasive sameness. I knew better. I began to feel a desire to rebel against such a homogenized view of the region, though admittedly I was hardly able to explain what exactly distinguished the situation in the different countries of the region.

Many years have passed since then. I have made many more trips, met many more people, and had a number of conversations in the United States and Europe, during which I encountered a great deal of surprise at the varied topography of the map of art in Eastern Europe that I was sketching out. In part driven by a wish to be a contrarian, in part by a desire to revisit my own childhood and early adulthood biography, and, in part, by what one could term, an objective need to fill in the gaps in the art history textbooks (almost entirely focused on the so-called Western art canon), I began a project of writing what I consider to be a more balanced study of the post-war art in Eastern Europe.

To collect materials for the book, I travelled extensively through the still ‘other’ Europe in the second half of the 1990s. As I did so, I was taken aback by the degree of resistance among many of my friends and colleagues from ‘our’ side of the continent to the idea of dissimilarities, not so much between different countries, since those were fairly obvious to everyone, but between Eastern Europe and the Western world. I was surprised by this response, though I understood its motivation perfectly. For many of my colleagues this ‘otherness’ was synonymous with being ‘not-quite-as-good’ as the West. They simply wished to be seen as ‘normal’ Europeans.

The majority of critics and art historians from Eastern Europe saw as their main problem the issue of how to integrate the region’s art practice into the universal art canon, or, more precisely, into Western art history. They were not interested in challenging the assumptions of those constructions or engaging in fashioning a perspective that would emphasize the ‘otherness’ of their part of the continent. The desire for so-called normalcy, described by Bojana Pejić, obscured the awareness of the idiosyncratic, and therefore to some extent abnormal, status of the region.<sup>1</sup> The aspiration to be normal, to be ‘just like the West’ was abnormal (according to the criteria of the norm developed in the West), since, from the Western perspective, Eastern Europe was not part of the West, but of the East. Naturally, people who lived here wanted their countries and the whole region to belong to the Western norm. This desire underpinned their resistance to any effort aimed at accentuating geographic, historic or contextual differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’, especially in the cultural fields.

Returning from my first, one could say, paradigm-setting visit to Hungary, I went by the Intercity train from Budapest to the beautiful town of Pécs, located in the south of the country. My travel companion was a well known Hungarian art historian of contemporary art, Katalin Keserü. During our conversation, Keserü asked me what I thought about Donald Kuspit’s book *The New Subjectivism*.<sup>2</sup> I was taken aback. We were just talking about current research on East European art, a subject we were both deeply interested in.

Kuspit's book seemed to provide the least appropriate model for a methodological revision of the work in this area. If one examined Kuspit's approach and his interpretation of the art of the 1980s, the ostensible subject of his book, then one would have to conclude that his categories were an expression of the tendencies in art-historical research that not only ignored the need for a revision of the current art geography, but solidified and reinforced the so-called universal perspective. The latter, if we translate it into geographically based terms, denotes a hierarchical model of analysis based on the conceptual framework created by the opposition between the centre and the periphery. Of course, it is possible to ignore both the need for a revision of the current art geography and for a new, non-hierarchical approach. However, if we take steps to reconsider the centre–periphery paradigm, and I would argue that we will only be able to develop better understanding of the artistic processes taking place in Eastern Europe through such reconsideration, then Kuspit's book, which so intrigued my Hungarian colleague, has indeed very little to offer us.

I remember mentioning a text by Peter Schjeldahl, a well-known American art critic associated with the *Village Voice* and the *New Yorker*, written for a catalogue of Mirosław Bałka's exhibition at the Gallery Foksal in Warsaw as another example of the universalizing discourse aimed at geographic appropriation of 'other' cultures. Addressing the issue of Eastern Europe, Schjeldahl wrote that the world of American art has been waiting for something 'new' from the old Soviet empire. According to the author, this expectation expressed a great deal of goodwill and real interest, but also amounted to an admission that Western art was in need of an exotic transfusion. The results so far had been meagre, he noted. The best artists from the region, such as Bałka or Ilya Kabakov, had explained why that has been the case. They also taught the West to adjust its expectations. Even the most refined local art cannot survive such a dark era unscathed. According to Schjeldahl, Eastern Europe's artists had to learn to speak the art language of the West before they could give the West something 'new' in the Western sense.<sup>3</sup>

This position raises the fundamental question of 'translatability', and as such it points to a paradox. A language is a sensitive instrument, one that gives most profound expression to the *genius loci* that manifests the artistic identity of a particular place. Because of that, language can function as a point of departure for reconstruction of the current art geography. The hierarchical perception of geography will be undermined not so much by noting of similarities but of differences. The revisionist geographer of Eastern Europe should extract that which is distinct, different and 'other' with respect to the 'Western idiom' and construct his analysis from this foundation.

Behind Schjeldahl's confidence, there is an abiding conviction that language is a transparent medium of communication. This view expresses a specific type of Modernist linguistic utopia, one which also saw various forms of abstraction as forms of communication with the universal conceptual foundation shared by all people. In other words, abstraction related to the intellect with its geometric order or to intuition with its emotional instantaneity. The utopia of common language proclaims: if we all use the same language, we will surely understand each other better. But, of course, there is no such thing as a neutral language. Today, English is the universal or global idiom, one we all use in our everyday life. The same holds true for art. The universal language of artistic culture is today the language of Western art.

It is likely that every one of the East European cultures is in some way colliding with the expectations of the Western curators and public and at the same time experiencing a certain want of understanding. When in 1983 the extensive exhibition *Présences polonaises*,<sup>4</sup> organized by Ryszard Stanisławski, opened in Paris (initially conceived as the next binary showcase of French art, after Paris–New York, Paris–Berlin and Paris–Moscow), Mieczysław Porębski, a notable Polish critic, published an article responding to the show which he titled *Absences polonaises*.<sup>5</sup> His chosen title and its implications give us a great deal to think about. In particular, it reveals that the external and the internal perceptions of a culture differ to a significant degree. Those perceptions rely on different languages, have access to different knowledge and, above all, have different historic frames of reference. We describe the history of local art differently in the 'peripheries' from how it is described in the 'centre'. From the perspective of the 'peripheries', we see the 'centre' in a different light. Above all, we see different centres or, more precisely, we are aware of tensions among those centres, something that is not apparent from the perspective of the centre and its singular point of view. Each centre has a tendency towards totalitarianism; it sees itself as the only source of light.

In his desire for making the absent artists present, Mieczysław Porębski challenged the Franco-centric perspective of Paris by pointing to Vienna as an alternative focal point for the culture of Eastern Europe. More precisely, he identified the tension between the two centres, Paris and Vienna, as it was perceived from the peripheral location of Kraków. Without a doubt, Porębski's Kraków perspective is not only more attuned to the very complex local situation, but also was much richer than that offered by Dominique Bozo, the director of the Centrum Pompidou, since it was able to recognize and account for the multiplicity and pluralism of the entire continent. This demonstrates that the revision of artistic geography and an attempt to formulate a different paradigm for it may be more successfully undertaken from peripheral locations such as

Budapest, Bucharest, Krakow or Sofia rather than from Paris or New York. Simply put, the periphery has better visibility. What is more, the rhetorical question asked once by Antoine Baudin – who's afraid of the peripheries? – is more likely to be addressed to those in the centre than to those outside.<sup>6</sup> If the centre is paralyzed by the fear of the peripheries, then perhaps this fear gives the peripheries a unique opportunity to revise the current conceptual paradigms.

My Hungarian colleague, whom I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is not the only East European intellectual interested in the universal perspective on art. I would even risk asserting that it is here, in our ‘peripheral’ portion of the continent, that the interest in the universalizing perspective as a contextual frame for the artistic and historic interpretation is inversely proportional to the absence of East European art from the textbooks on European art history. The exhibitions of art from the region and their accompanying catalogues have compensated somewhat for this absence. They have not only shown works by artists from the region, but also inscribed them into the circuits of Western culture. However, an exhibition, understood as a form of presentation, is never neutral in the context of the tension between the centre and the periphery.

What does the word ‘exhibition’ mean? What does it signify? And what does it say about the character of all exhibitions?<sup>7</sup> The word comes originally from Latin *exhibitio*, from *exhibeo*, to put on display, to show. According to the *OED*, it means, among others, displaying something for public evaluation and judgement, subjecting something to a control or an inspection. We could go further in our etymological exploration and state that that which is exhibited is admitted for public viewing, to be seen on a stage or to appear in the agora, and therefore is subject to evaluation. In this context, one could view the Western exhibitions of East European art as a form of inspection of ‘our’ art by ‘their’ Europe, or, to put it a different way, inspection of the ‘other’ Europe by Europe proper.

This way of understanding what ‘exhibiting’ means brings up the problem of power. Naturally, power rests in the hands of the inspectors or examiners whose role consists of supervision and evaluation of that which will be exhibited. However, the relationship between the East and the West, or, more precisely, between Eastern Europe and Western Europe in the 1990s had a geographic or spatial character. Space is never transparent; it signifies. Moreover, it functions as a key element in the system of power. As noted by Michel Foucault, space constitutes an essential plane for the relations of power. In other words, power is located in a spatial structure and, naturally, is interested in maintaining its non-transparency, in concealing the principles on which it rests and the mechanisms with which it functions.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps a critical geography proposed by Irit Rogoff in reference to a different art-historical problem, formulated in the context of different critical discourses (feminism, post-colonial studies and psychoanalysis), may be useful here for discovering or deconstructing the relations of power embodied in space, including the space of the divided and now uniting Europe.<sup>9</sup> Approaching the problem of space from a different vantage point, one could say that it is the border that divides two different spatial territories, one of the most important geographic concepts, that is associated with power. But the border not only divides space, it also connects it. This double meaning of the concept is related to what Jacques Derrida referred to as the *aporetic* character of the border, its dual function.<sup>10</sup> Understood as *aporia*, the exhibition (if it crosses borders) consists of showing ‘this’, ‘there’, and thereby describes a powerful spatially located entity (the border) that divides and connects different areas of space, different geographic territories.

Let us return once more to the meaning of the term ‘exhibition’. We know now the etymology and the selective meanings of the concept. Yet what is an exhibition in contemporary culture, and what role does it play in the functioning of artistic practice and in the mechanics of power perceivable in it? It is obvious that an exhibition functions as a basic medium of exchange of values and information about contemporary art (and not only contemporary). Without the possibility of exhibiting, that which should be shown will not be seen. As Jean-Marc Poinsot observed, we interact with contemporary art mainly through the medium of exhibitions.<sup>11</sup> But, seen from a different perspective, the exhibition becomes a part of the system of power, revealing a dependence on that which is shown by those for whom it is shown. Those questions can be posed in an equal measure with respect to the reconstruction of the art history of Eastern Europe, as well as its ambition to be present in and for the West. In other words, we could ask how the curators of exhibitions focused on Eastern Europe wish the art of the region to be admitted to the agora, to be displayed in public. One could also turn the question around and ask to what extent the art of the region has been subjected to an evaluation of the West in order to allow the latter to claim that it did not neglect Eastern Europe in the process of European unification.

It is worth noting that historically the West has not shown a great deal of interest in organizing exhibitions featuring art from this part of Europe. However, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, there was a noticeable change in attitude. The slight increase in interest in the ‘close neighbour’ of Eastern Europe found expression not only in exhibitions but also in studies dealing with the history of art exhibits and of disciplinary discourses formed within their context. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that Krisztina Passuth, who

examined the history of the avant-garde exhibitions in 2002, observed a noticeable lack of interest among Western scholars in East European initiatives.<sup>12</sup> For instance, Bruce Altshuler's book *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition* does not cite any of them.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the anthology *Thinking about Exhibitions* does not mention any exhibitions of East European art.<sup>14</sup> This does not mean, however, that the problematic of the East European exhibitions has been completely absent from the Western discourse. One of a few studies written about Eastern European exhibitions before 1989 has been produced by Milena Kalinovska, one of the Western curatorial pioneers of the art of the region.<sup>15</sup>

The paradigmatic showcase of the art from Central and Eastern Europe, one based on a comparative approach *par excellence*, was the exhibition *Europa, Europa*, organized in 1994 by Ryszarda Stanisławski and Christoph Brockhaus at the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle in Bonn.<sup>16</sup> Here it is not as important that prior interest in the initiatives of this kind was minimal. One can only point to two other exhibitions: *Expressiv. Mitteleuropäische Kunst seit 1960*, shown in 1987 in Vienna and a year later in Washington, DC,<sup>17</sup> and *Reduktivismus*, organized also in Vienna in 1987.<sup>18</sup> What is significant is that *Europa, Europa* created a frame of reference not only for reflections on exhibiting the 'other' Europe, but also for discussions about the canon of the region's art in confrontation with European art's history. The task before the organizers was not easy from the standpoint of organizational matters or theoretical and psychological ones. The fall of the Berlin Wall and of the Iron Curtain allowed the organizers to pose difficult questions about the identity of the Europe formed by the Yalta agreement. In this light, the political context of the Western curators' motivations, as well as of those of the hosts of the exhibition, was fairly obvious. The ambition of the curators was to confront the consequences of the division of the continent sanctioned in Yalta, or, more precisely, to challenge that order within the scope of European culture. One should question, however, their reification of the divisions created in Yalta and their extension of them to the pre-Yalta period. There is scarcely any historic evidence that would allow us to speak of pre-war Europe in terms of East–West, a division that was created only in the aftermath of the conflict.

The curatorial concept of *Europa, Europa*, clearly tied to the political context of the end of the Cold War, is perhaps the most problematic from an art-historic perspective, since the artistic map of pre-war Europe cannot easily be re-drawn following the war. However, this is not the only objection that can be raised with respect to the curatorial practice of the exhibition's organizers. The other clearly related issue has to do with the geographic space created by the comparative frame. For instance, the exhibition located Czech Cubism (for the first and perhaps the only time) next to Russian Constructivism, with which

it had few, if any, links, and at the same time did not mention French art. In general, Prague as an art centre was completely detached from its artistic and historic points of reference, such as the distant metropolitan centre of Paris or the close one of Vienna. The exhibition also failed to acknowledge the fact that Czech Cubism was an assertion of explicitly European modernity identified with Paris. This assertion was directed towards conservative Vienna, the political master of the Czechs, but one considered old-fashioned from the perspective of culture and still mired in the pre-avant-garde milieu of the *fin de siècle*. The curatorial decision, which defied art-historic facts, made Czech Cubism into an exotic and scarcely understandable phenomenon. In general, the retrospective perception of the art geography of Europe from the point of view of Yalta eliminated two centres key to the understanding of the first half of the twentieth century from the cultural field of vision: Vienna and Berlin, both of which functioned as essential components within the network of regional international associations. One could raise similar objections with respect to the post-war portion of the exhibition. If the Yalta agreement determined the reach of the map embraced by the exhibition, then why did the curators not include art of East Germany? This curatorial decision is even less understandable than the previous one, since East Germany was not only a key component of the post-war Yalta order, but its art was no less interesting from a political and artistic perspective than that produced in other countries of the region.

However, a key point in the discussion of the exhibition pertains not so much to the geography and spatial borders within which the exhibition operated, but to the problem of the definition of identity of East European culture, its historic significance and value. In an interview with a Polish journal *Magazyn Sztuki* (*Art Magazine*), Ryszard Stanisławski stressed that his main intention was to demonstrate the non-parochial character of East European art.<sup>19</sup> Reading his remarks, or rather reading between the lines, it is impossible not to notice that the exhibition attempted to reassess the value of the art of the ‘other’ Europe in the context of its absence from the art history textbooks. The same sentiment is expressed throughout the monumental catalogue of the show. This strategy is completely understandable. Citing Jean-Marc Poinsot once again, one could say that to organize an exhibition is to write the history of art.<sup>20</sup>

Less well understood are the consequences of such a strategy. It is impossible to call into question the achievements and value of the exhibition, especially in its presentation of the massive amount of artistic and historic material. The problem lies elsewhere. *Europa, Europa* did not pose any theoretical and methodological questions with respect to that material,

including the most basic question concerning the instrumentalization of its own interpretation in the context of the Western canon of art history. Although the exhibition expanded the material base of knowledge, it did not revise in any way the paradigmatic perception of the current art geography, nor did it suggest that the current art geography was in any way inadequate. For example, instead of subjecting the concept of universalism – the main ideological tool of the Western canon – to a critique, the exhibition endorsed the view that writing of the history of art can be geographically neutral. Instead of deconstructing the universalism of the one art history, it participated in its further mythologizing. Returning to the terminology I introduced at the beginning of the chapter, one could say that Stanisławski's and Brockhaus's exhibition subjected the art of Eastern Europe to an inspection of the West, an inspection that used its own language and its own value system as the criteria of significance and excellence. The exhibition did not present a possibility of a different, opposing language or languages, nor did it engender a confrontation with the system of power – that is, the Western European art canon.

Other exhibitions of Central European art tried to navigate around the geographic and historic reefs on which *Europa, Europa* got caught. The point of departure for *Central European Avant-Garde Exchange and Transformations: 1910–1930*, organized in 2002 by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, was provided by an unarticulated critique of the Bonn show. This is revealed in the structure of the American exhibition as well as the strategy of its curator, Timothy Benson, who made a concerted effort to define more precisely the show's subject area. The exhibition did not consist of the art of the region as such (which was the case in Bonn), subjected to an examination based on the Western (universal) values of canonic art history. Instead, it focused on revealing the historic processes involved in the production of a local art environment. That production was approached from a perspective of international exchanges of artistic and non-artistic ideas among specific centres that participated in the transformation of the classic avant-garde. The history of the twentieth-century art of the region was not depicted as a parallel and supplemental effort aimed at the integration of Central Europe into the Western textbook canon. Instead, the geography of art was exhibited – the processes that shaped the urban centres of the artistic culture of the region, revealed through very specific events – exhibitions, publications, and works of art.

A similar unspoken critique of *Europa, Europa* could be observed in other exhibitions: *Der Riss im Raum*, a show organized in 1994 at the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin and a year later at the Gallery Zachęta in Warsaw, as well as *Aspekte/Positionen. 50 Jahre Kunst aus Mitteleuropa, 1949–1999*, shown for the first time in 1999 in Vienna.<sup>21</sup> In those instances, however, the subject of the

exhibition was not defined by the processes that formed the region's art, but through the geography and historic borders of the observed and exhibited cultures. The first exhibition focused on Germany (West and East), Poland and Czechoslovakia (with Czech and Slovak art treated separately). The second exhibition, prepared and organized somewhat less precisely, gathered material from a much larger number of countries. It included virtually the whole of Eastern Europe (with the exception of Germany and Bulgaria), Austria and all the countries formed in the breakup of Yugoslavia.

Despite the fact that the catalogue accompanying each exhibition organized the material in a systematic manner by country, the exhibitions themselves attempted to avoid such schematic presentation and stressed the comparative perspective on the art of the last several decades. If the Berlin show focused on work of individual artists, the Viennese emphasized historic processes and artistic tendencies. However, it is worth noting that both shows focused exclusively on post-war Central European art, a fact that in and of itself is not problematic. What is problematic is the instrumentalization of the artistic and historic geography. If those exhibitions had the ambition to showcase the post-Yalta culture of Eastern Europe, then why did the Berlin exhibition include works produced in West Germany or the Viennese works produced in Austria, two countries that found themselves on the other side of, or, more accurately, outside, the Iron Curtain? What is more, if both exhibitions focused on the culture of the Communist period, then why was Czech and Slovak art shown separately, and similarly, why was art of post-Yugoslavian countries shown in this manner in Vienna if the country's disintegration took place after the fall of Communism? The answer is simple and largely parallels that given in reference to *Europa, Europa*. It has to do with the political and administrative pressures on curatorial practice.

If these two exhibitions can be seen in a more or less ambivalent geographic and historic frame of reference, then the next two I will mention appear very precise in their perspective. I am referring to the 1995 exhibition *Beyond Relief*, organized in Chicago, and *After the Wall*, shown for the first time in 1999 in Stockholm.<sup>22</sup> Both exhibitions focused on the post-Communist period. The first included works from the entire East European region, with the exception of the new countries formed in the wake of the breakup of the Soviet Union. The second showcased works from the entire territory of the Soviet empire, as well as former Yugoslavia. The first exhibition organized the artistic production of the region according to individual countries; the second focused on individual, mainly (though not exclusively) younger artists. As noted by Bojana Pejić, it attempted to avoid spotlighting 'stars', well-known artists from the region who were already firmly ensconced within the contemporary culture

of the West, such as Marina Abramović, Ilya Kabakov or Krzysztof Wodiczko. One could also say that the first exhibition, created in the mid-1990s, opened the entire series of exhibitions discussed here, while the Stockholm show closed it. What is more, it marked the end of the post-Soviet period in European culture.

*After the Wall* did not organize the displayed works according to individual countries, but according to problems that engaged individual artists, such as social critique, recent history, subjectivity and identity, as well as body and gender, an issue which was emphasized in Stockholm. This portion of the exhibition was shown in its own separate space on the first floor of the exhibition building. However, the exhibition was framed by historic processes, specifically the fall of Communism, taking place during the decade since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The year 1999 was the last moment when it was still possible to realize such a project. Soon thereafter the post-Communist world would disappear from the map of Europe as a historically determined territory. The curators of the exhibition were fully aware of this.<sup>23</sup> Will we be able, in the near future, to find similarities between the former East Germany and Armenia, Slovenia, Poland or Belarus? It is doubtful, especially since it was not easy to do this even during the post-Communist period. Larger problems may be created by the fact that formerly united groups, such as Czechs and Slovaks, Slovenians and Croatians, are now separated by state borders. This may bring some closer to the membership of the European Union but gives others a much smaller chance of being included. Because regulations governing the united Europe require that its external borders must be diligently guarded, citizens of countries that formerly belonged to Yugoslavia, but who now find themselves outside the European Union, may have problems moving freely though the territories of their former countries. This begs the question of whether we will be able in the future to construct a shared background for the artistic processes taking place in those neighbouring regions. It is unlikely, though we may be able to do so within a strictly historic frame. The post-Soviet world, seen through the lens of political geography, is disappearing from the map of contemporary Europe and this will render exhibitions like *After the Wall* increasingly problematic. The end of the twentieth century was the last moment when such an exhibition was still possible.

If *After the Wall* closed the post-war period in the art of Eastern Europe (understood as a political construct), then it also opened a new, entirely different one. Here a somewhat naïve question is posed: is there, in fact, such a thing as Eastern Europe? It is something real or just a phantasmagoric projection? Does its culture function as something ‘other’ than European culture? Certainly, Eastern Europe has been a political construction, which in

part contains the contours of the historically determined Central Europe. Looking to the past, one finds references to Central Europe in the German political discourses focused on Vienna, the capital of the Habsburg Empire, and, somewhat later, on Berlin, the capital of the newly created Germany led by Otto von Bismarck. If the Viennese discourse and the political practice it inspired were relatively open to the idea of multicultural society inhabiting the territory under the administrative control of Vienna, then the Prussian state practice and ideology were not only oppressive, but also aggressive. This Central European political background is highly significant because it points to the origins of certain nostalgia prevalent in the territories of the former Austrian Empire, but entirely missing from those which fell under the Prussian control. One of the best examples of this attitude is Milan Kundera's famous essay 'The Tragedy of Central Europe'.<sup>24</sup> Even though the Austrian discourse was far less oppressive than the Prussian, in both cases the concept of Central Europe contained an ideology of German political domination of nations that inhabited the eastern portion of Europe.

This is not the only geographic point of reference for the historic discourse on Central Europe, since the latter was directed towards the West as well as the East. The political doctrine formulated by Germans used the concept of Central Europe to construct German national identity vis-à-vis the East (represented mainly by the Slavs and Hungarians) as well as the West or Western Europe (identified primarily with France). The distinction made by Nietzsche between 'culture' and 'civilization' functioned in this context as the philosophical rationalization of this ideology. This opposition, more emphatically embraced in Germany than in Austria, advocated the defence of 'culture' against 'civilization' and the export of the former eastward.<sup>25</sup>

The above-mentioned political and historic points of reference were the main reason why in the countries created in the aftermath of World War I there was virtually no interest in this kind of regional identification of culture. The oppressive tradition of this ideology discouraged artists from seeking to anchor their identity in the region. What is more, if this type of discourse strove to maintain some kind of collective distance from the West before the war (the West that was and still is idealized in the East), it did not encourage creation of cultural ties within Eastern Europe during the interwar period or the seeking out of artistic identities within the frame of that tradition. This situation changed drastically after World War II, when a sizable portion of the continent fell within the Soviet sphere of influence. Neither the cultural elites nor the people wished to be identified with 'Eastern Europe', and therefore with the empire of the Soviet Union. Timothy Garton Ash writes that the tragedy of Central Europe after 1945 was its incorporation into the Soviet Bloc and its

disappearance within the structure of the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> He is both right and wrong. What happened had a tragic effect on the culture, society and political and economic ambitions of this part of Europe. Yet this was also the moment when Central Europe as a term of discourse gained a chance to be reborn. Wishing to avoid identification with the Soviet Union and its empire, Central Europe began to reappear as a concept of cultural geography, but with completely different significance than that given to it by the German tradition. It was during this period that the aforementioned nostalgia for the Habsburg Empire would appear, especially in countries like Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Even though this type of identity construction could be observed to a greater or lesser degree throughout the region, its discourse did not necessarily form stronger ties between different countries, at least not on the cultural front. The artists connected with Modernism and the neo-avant-garde tended to focus their search for identity on the international sphere of universal – rather than Central European – culture, a sphere constituted through the shared use of the English language (and, somewhat earlier, French).<sup>27</sup> The revival of Central Europe was the project of dissidents, writers and independent, politically committed intellectuals, not of artists.

This identity strategy seemed very useful immediately after 1989 from both political and cultural perspectives. After all, this was the moment when a whole series of exhibitions on Central European art began. This was also the last moment when such a strategy could be realized. Now, when some of the countries of that Eastern Europe stand already within the European Union or eagerly await admission, while others, unfortunately, have been excluded, at least for the near future, the concept of Central Europe can no longer function as a shared bond or a plane of identification. What is more, this concept could turn into a burden, an obstacle in the politics of identity for those countries and environments closest to European unification. After all, in what way could this tradition shape the strategy of regional identification in face of the unification process? As I already mentioned, the countries of the region are currently highly diversified with regards to their economic and political situations. The more advanced do not need an ideology which links them to countries that have to contend with different conditions and are at a different stage on the road leading to unified Europe. There is also another reason. Having liberated themselves from the Communist rule, they want to forget about the past. The idea of Central Europe, which functioned as a substitute for real cultural ambitions, had the effect of neutralizing Communist, imperialist ideology and as such has been connected with traumatic memories of the past. The desire to forget the past is a natural response to a traumatic experience. Moreover, if nostalgia for the multicultural organism of the Habsburg Empire

fulfilled cultural ambitions of societies politically subordinated to the Soviet Union and its culture, then the new reality of the European Union offers a much more attractive opportunity for constructing a European identity, one that links the periphery with the centre of European culture, namely the West, a place where Central Europe always wished to be located. Those processes are very apparent in the Czech Republic, where one is always reminded that Prague is located west of Vienna and that its culture is more European (Western) than German, not to mention Austrian. Incidentally, this was one of the reasons for the initial lack of enthusiasm among Czech politicians for the idea of the Visegrad Group.

Let us return, however, to recent history and to the problem of exhibitions, in particular *Europa, Europa*, the paradigmatic exhibition for the East–West art relationship, and to its ambition of inscribing the art of Eastern Europe (or more precisely of that part of ‘Central Europe’ defined as ‘Eastern’) into the universal context of modern art history. Naturally, history contravenes those types of efforts. The different Europes did not share the same experiences, nor did they give analogous weight to culture. The art of Czechoslovakia, Romania and Hungary developed in different semiotic and ideological spaces than the art of France or Italy. The universal perspective, understood as a methodological tool, prevents one from reaching particular meanings of culture and from describing its regional, national and local identities. One can easily understand the psychological reasons behind the frustration of the art historians working on Eastern Europe, caused by the almost complete absence of the art dear to them from the cultural canon of the continent, due to its peripheral location. The solution to this problem cannot be reached, however, by perpetuating imperial and hierarchical models. It rests with a revision of the current paradigms and in finding replacements for the present analytic tools that will reveal to us the meanings of the cultures of ‘other’ geographic territories.

This task may be performed by problems raised within critical art geography, problems that have not been subjected to critical analysis elsewhere. In general, critical geography could reveal the power dynamics inscribed in the spatial discourse of geography, if we accept Foucault’s observation that relations of power are inscribed spatially.<sup>28</sup> The issue of the relationships among different places, more specifically between different locations of European culture, or between the East and the West, will emerge, therefore, as a key component of this approach. The traditional art geography or *Kunstgeographie*, a methodology familiar from German art history but not limited to it, was based on a metaphysical understanding of location, its character and its relation to the ‘natural’ activities of its inhabitants (‘Blut und Boden’).<sup>29</sup> Among many other valid criticisms of this approach, one could mention that it did not reveal

the dynamic of relations among specific places and their ‘trajectories’, to use Paul Virilio’s term.<sup>30</sup> Traditional art geography is static; critical geography formulates dynamic interpretive models based not only on interrelations among different places on the world map, but also among directions of interests and vectors or trajectories of perception of the different places on that map. This does not mean that geography, defined in such a way, avoids the problem of identity. On the contrary, it does not deal with identity in terms of the metaphysics of place, but in reference to the dynamic of vectors. Virilio suggests that the problem of our identity is not located at the intersection between objectivity and subjectivity, but rather encompasses the vectors of the movement of individuals, both physically and culturally. The concepts of the East as well as the West cannot be neutral from that perspective. Their understanding, in the West and in the East, is dependent on and is inscribed into various coordinated and sometime incompatible factors. The dynamic geography of European culture, constructed in this way, will reveal not one Europe but many. Without a doubt it will pose a challenge; one, however, that is worth taking up, since it may allow us to develop a better understanding of the place(s) in which we live.

The semiotics of geographic concepts and especially of their vectors reveals the dynamic of the culture of a particular place. For example, the vector of the post-Stalinist thaw in Poland as well as other East European countries was directed not so much towards the West but, more precisely, towards Paris. France functioned here as the mythological centre of modern art, an artistic point of reference, a sublimation of Western culture, the opposite of barbarism identified with Eastern Socialist Realism. In the East one not only ignored the cultural and political rivalries among the different Western centres (for instance, between New York and Paris) but also, in general, anything that interfered with that idealized image. The East did not take notice of the internal political tensions resulting from the challenges posed to bourgeois culture by Marxist discourse and by Communist sympathizers.

When in 1959 André Breton sent a speech to Kraków for the opening of the exhibition *PHASES*, his text, packed with political phraseology, full of pathos and accusations directed against French culture, was greeted with a good deal of reserve.<sup>31</sup> The rhetoric of politically engaged art was in the East associated with the opposite geographic direction – not against the West, but the East. The traffic from East to West was one-dimensional and selective, and in the opposite direction it had a similar character. Western interest in Eastern Europe during this period focused on similarities rather than differences, at least in those phenomena that were translatable into the language of the Western artistic paradigm. That is why the paintings of the Polish artist Tadeusz Kantor

were so popular, but the works of Jerzy Nowosielski, his Kraków colleague, were not. Igor Zabel observed that this happened because the Modernist ideology of the Cold War and the neocolonial period was based in the belief that the Western modern forms and criteria were modern *par excellence*, and as such had universal value.<sup>32</sup> What is more, this belief was shared in Eastern Europe, and that is how this issue is still largely understood here today. That is why the exhibitions of East European art prepared by East European curators for Western consumption have the character I described earlier; they offer that art to Western public opinion. The vector of East European culture is still directed westward, towards the centre, and still has a rather one-dimensional character. It does not point towards other peripheral territories. This culture still seeks approval from where the power resides and does not look for allies among other marginalized regions in a confrontation with the locus of power. Therefore, the subjectivity of that culture is still formed by the one-dimensional trajectories described earlier.

However, I do not intend to suggest that we should ignore the place in our research strategies. The acknowledgement of differences among actual locations (diversity without hierarchy) is certainly one of my goals. Art geography could use the strategy of framing, described by Norman Bryson after Jonathan Culler, to dislodge hierarchical paradigms of knowledge about art and to reveal differences among locations.<sup>33</sup> The concept of the ‘frame’, which in the Culler/Bryson interpretation replaces that of the context, is of course based on Derrida’s notion of *parergon*. *Parergon* is a structure inseparable from the text and, most significantly for our discussion, it is not externally imposed; rather, it takes shape as a result of the interpretive strategy. The invocation of the frame/context in reference to a work of art constitutes, therefore, according to Bryson, a step backwards, towards uncertainty of the text (the work), and towards its anchoring base. But once taken, a step cannot be retraced. The context is a text, or, as Bryson stresses, ‘it is just more text’.<sup>34</sup> Context, or to return to Derrida’s metaphor, ‘the frame’, has an active quality. Through our interpretive strategies, we activate that text or context. Hence the frame, invoked by us but never appearing on its own, reveals something of a *genius loci*, a concept which here appears as a research strategy rather than as a metaphysics of the place. Independently, then, from what the picture plane may contain, its meaning is created by the frame, or to put it in a different way, we ourselves create that text through the process of framing. If, then, on our visits to Budapest, Bucharest, Moscow, Prague, Sofia or Warsaw we notice art operating in the ‘Western art idiom’, and we are neither tourists (Western or Eastern) nor representatives of a major art institution who have one day to collect materials from the entire region, we will observe diversity and richness

of meanings. We will notice those precisely because of our experiences and sensitivities as well as our interpretive strategies. Although observed forms may sometimes be similar, our ‘framing’ will give them distinct meanings. We should therefore focus more on the frame than the idiom. Perhaps the art of the entire world, or at least of the East and the West, speaks with a similar language. However, it says something quite different within ‘our’ frame.

Peter Schjeldahl assures us that the works of Miroslaw Bałka and Ilya Kabakov operate within the poetics of contemporary art culture that one could find in Düsseldorf, London, New York or Rome. We cannot be seduced by the fantasies of Western curators of the great international exhibitions. We must be much more incisive and active in our interpretations as we contemplate the ‘frame’ of the work. The language of Bałka and Kabakov is only superficially similar to the language used in the centre. But if we read it through the frame, if we consider the relationship text-con-text, then we will see its actual meaning to be completely different from that found in ‘the Western art idiom’. One could say, for instance, that Kabakov’s installations are unreadable without reference to the Russian social practice of communal living commonly found in the large cities of the Soviet Union.<sup>35</sup> The same could be said with regards to Bałka’s sculptures, which cannot be understood without reference to the artist’s personal mythology situated in his local environment: his house in Otwock as well as materials used to make headstones and soap.<sup>36</sup>

In defining – or rather drawing – the frame, one could refer to many territories and levels of Eastern Europe. One could begin with those readily experienced by the scores of tourists visiting the region, the ones that are not always pleasant, especially if a tourist uses a taxi or dines at restaurants run by unscrupulous proprietors. But we could end with sophisticated and subtle elements of artistic tradition, ones that reach through the ages, as well as those connected with the traumatic experiences of the Soviet domination. The tradition certainly functions here as a clear point of reference from which we can begin to frame our geographic territory. Traditions, especially those that run deep, played and still play an active role in forming art’s identity. One could mention, for instance, the impact of Czech Surrealism on the post-‘thaw’ art in Czechoslovakia, of the Hungarian European School or of Polish and Russian Constructivism on the scores of artists seeking a remedy for the Communist indoctrination. One could also point out that in those places that did not develop their own avant-garde traditions, or, more broadly, traditions of independent art (both in an aesthetic and institutional sense), and where artists were in effect deprived of the support of history, alternative forms of resistance vis-à-vis the official aesthetics developed very late. In Bulgaria, where one can observe this phenomenon, an attempt to create alternative art exemplified by

the so-called April Generation active at the beginning of the 1960s did not result in the ‘modernization’ of art culture and took place within the context of the official institutional system, and within an aesthetic similar to the official art of socialist realism. The only difference between the works of the artists of the April Generation and those of the mainstream could be found in the greater colouristic freedom and larger thematic repertoire, which included landscape and portraiture, of the former. In this Balkan corner of Communism, the ‘modernization’, or rather ‘post-modernization’ of art took place only in the 1980s in the works of artists such as Luchezar Boyadjiev and Nedko Solakov, to mention only the best-known individuals.

Tradition or its lack can be part of the frame. So can a desire for tradition, the search for it, especially within the sphere of universalizing discourse. One could even say that one of the key elements defining an East European context and framing its artistic processes has been the effort to upgrade the value of our culture within the framework of universal categories, which in practice means within Western perception. One can observe here not only a certain type of consent to the imperialism of the Western idiom, but also driving aspiration to write our culture into the universal history. The strategy embraced by *Europa, Europa* is an excellent example of that tendency. There are many reasons why this is the case. Economic underdevelopment of this part of the content in the past and especially in the present of the dynamic global economy is certainly one of them. Another reason, linked to the economic situation, is a sense of political powerlessness. The peripheries do not determine the world order; that is done only in the centre. Eastern Europe feels, for a number of reasons, that it has been wronged by history. The results of decades-long domination by the Soviet model of governance, imposed on the region by Stalin, but also, in a certain sense, by the West, are felt particularly keenly now, when that model has largely disappeared. They offer clear evidence that this region has been treated as a second-class Europe. Naturally, this gives rise to a desire for compensation and for demonstration to oneself as well as others that this region, at least on a cultural plane, does not differ from the other. That is the motive behind the efforts to neutralize context and to give universalism an absolute status within the academic and curatorial practice. There are also psychological reasons, which stem from the earlier mentioned ones, but cannot be reduced to them. Here, the sense of economic and political handicap is much greater than the lack of comforts resulting from actual poverty or lack of influence in international politics. This is perhaps the most powerful reason for universalizing strategies, one embedded in earlier mentioned traumatic experiences and as such difficult to neutralize. Magda Cârneci writes that there are many Eastern Europes: there is a geographic, a historic, a political and also a cultural Eastern

Europe.<sup>37</sup> The latter creates a very particular defensive mechanism against the ‘evil of history’ or the ‘evil of politics’. The culture of this part of the continent could function as a defensive strategy against totalitarian oppression because it had absolute character; it was an ahistoric construction. It gave East European intellectuals a sphere within which they could create an identity through integration with the European universe of values.

These, then, are the underpinnings of the desire for universalism so deeply rooted in Eastern Europe. They also ground the mechanisms involved in production of the cultural mythologies, which compensate for traumatic historic experiences. In almost all countries of the region, one finds an abiding belief in the country’s exceptional significance for the future of Europe embedded in local messianism, a vision that the country preserves the ‘true’ European values that are more authentic than those produced in the West because they are free of commercialism. We also encounter here a self-identification with ‘the defensive bulwark’, or alternatively, the ‘bridge’ between West and East, a border between civilization and barbarism.

The new geography of Eastern Europe must, therefore, encompass not only the metaphysics of place but also the entire range of historic factors appearing at the juncture between traditions, definitions of the place situated within local tensions, mythologies, inferiority complexes, political and social structures and, on the other side, cultural trajectories, reception of cultural models, and export and import of artistic and other processes. Culture of a given region, in the case of the post-war Eastern Europe, cannot be comprehended without such a complex analysis. Or, to put it in a different way, without it it will be perceived exclusively as a periphery of the Western culture, an extension of its function. Of course, it is impossible to deny the fact that Eastern Europe has functioned as a type of a periphery for Western Europe. One must, however, transform such position into an analytic advantage, a tool that will allow us to reveal the meaning and the dynamic of the place in its entire, complex identity. We can no longer rely on the traditional geography of artistic influence, which equates the peripheral position with subordination *vis-à-vis* the (Western) centre. Perhaps we should retire the concept of the periphery altogether and instead use that of the margin.<sup>38</sup> The margins have a much greater autonomy in relation to the centre and may have an active role. They can impact the centre, or at least reveal other elements that are invisible from the perspective of the centre itself. However, this problematic is not taken up in this book, since its project is focused on the particular character of one of the geo-artistic margins of European culture. It seeks to reach its specificity and individuality formed in the context of the historic processes functioning in Eastern Europe after World War II.



Part 1

# Behind the Iron Curtain before 1948





## 2

# The Surrealist Interregnum, 1945–8

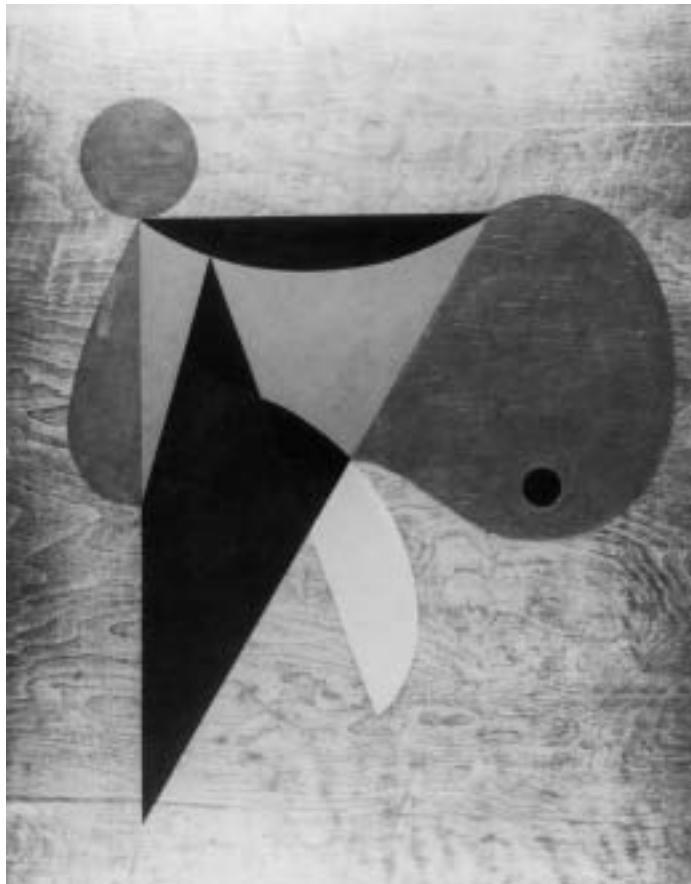
In mid-October 1945 a group of Hungarian art critics – Erno Kállai, Pál Kiss, Arpád Mezei and Imre Pán – and the artist Lajos Kassák, the sometime art critic and co-creator of the Hungarian avant-garde, published a manifesto that laid the foundation for the so-called European School:

Europe and the old European ideals lay in ruin. Until now, the term ‘European Ideal’ meant a Western European ideal. From now on we must consider the entire Europe. The New Europe could be built as a synthesis of the East and the West. In 1945 AD everyone must decide whether to participate in realizing the idea of ‘being a European’. We must create a vital European art, one that will describe a new relationship to life, to an individual, and to a society. That objective characterizes the activities of the European School. This goal serves as the guiding light for our public lectures, exhibitions and publications. We seek the philosopher’s stone, knowing full well that such a stone is not a chemical substance, but a living idea that can come into being only through the efforts of an individual and a society.<sup>1</sup>

The art community that embraced the manifesto enthusiastically embarked on ‘the search for the philosopher’s stone’. In the years 1946–8 it organized almost 40 exhibitions, produced many low-budget publications and sponsored significant number of lectures.<sup>2</sup>

The European School manifesto was an expression of a broadly formulated response to the post-war European reality. It expressed an awareness – or, perhaps more accurately, a utopian desire – to build a ‘united Europe’ on the ruins of the old one created by the war.<sup>3</sup> It was announced at a time when it was perhaps still difficult to foresee the future direction of the cultural policies embraced by the East European governments. In 1945 it might have been hard to imagine what would happen by the end of the decade, when in all countries of the region Socialist Realism would be decreed as the only valid art doctrine.

1. Dezső Korniss,  
*Playing the  
Bag-Pipe*, 1947.  
Hungarian  
National  
Gallery,  
Budapest.

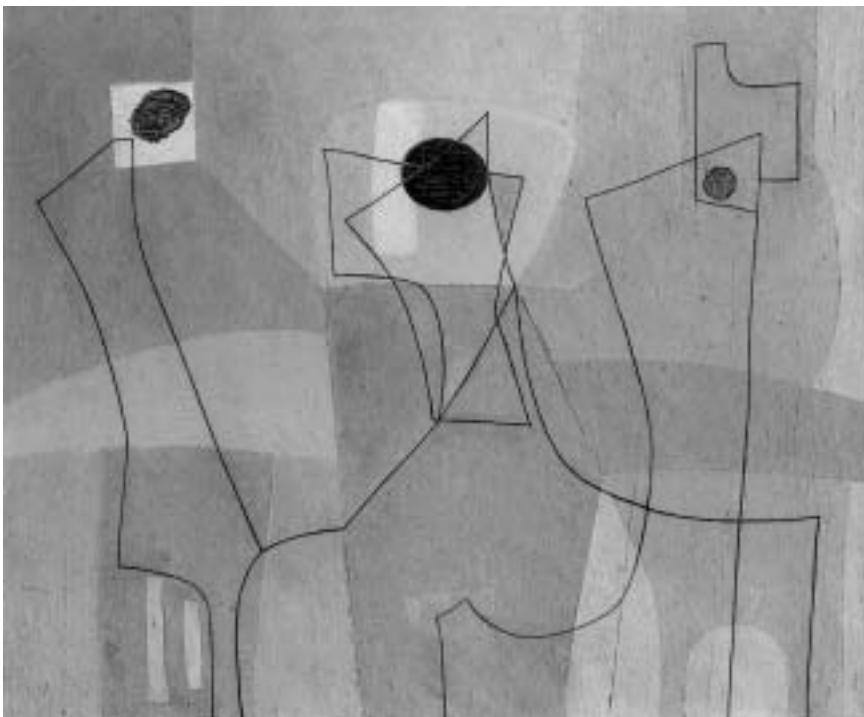


However, seen from the perspective provided by historic hindsight, the manifesto of the European School was as much an expression of a utopian longing for united Europe as of not yet clearly articulated anxiety pervading the interregnum period that this ideal could be only sustained as a utopian vision. It could be seen as an early response to an impending, though perhaps not yet clearly apparent, danger.

The manifesto did not present a concrete artistic programme because the art community which produced and embraced it was not at all homogenous. As Éva Forgács observed, despite the fact that the members of the European School shared similar experiences and espoused similar goals, they differed significantly in their approach to art.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, artists from other collectives, such as the Abstract Artists Group (Tihamér Gyarmathy, Ferenc Martyn, Tamás Lossonczy and others) maintained a more or less active relationship with the European School. In general, everyone affiliated with the

group referenced broadly understood the tradition of European (mainly French) painting from post-Impressionism and Fauvism, through Cubism and Surrealism, to more abstract approaches, including Constructivism, all frequently combined with a variety of influences coming from figurative art.

On the one hand, the European School included Dezső Korniss (illus. 1), a highly idiosyncratic artist who passed through a variety of stages and explored a wide range of stylistic approaches.<sup>5</sup> During the period under discussion, he painted images that applied Modernist stylization to figurative motifs and approached decorative, sometimes even completely abstract, solutions. The school also encompassed the consistent and personal art of Margit Anna, who worked in a somewhat naïve and severe ‘child-like’ style, as well as the works of Júlia Vajda (illus. 2), whose expressively delicate – almost lyrical – paintings explored the tension between colour and line and were part allusive and part figurative. Endre Bálint, another artist associated with the European School, used a stylistic approach closer to Expressionism. He sometimes relied on dramatic presentation and explored psychological characterization of the portrayed figures. Other paintings by prominent members of the School such as Béla Bán or Jenő Barcsay reveal a much more dynamic approach to figure drawing and colour. One must also add a rather large group of artists who



2. Júlia Vajda,  
*Three Figures*,  
1947. Private  
collection.

3. Ferenc  
Martyn,  
*Rooster*, 1946.  
Janus Pannonius  
Múzeum, Pécs.



produced landscapes, still lifes and genre scenes harking back to the early Modernist works of the École de Paris. It is also worth noting that European School artists frequently changed their means of expression and rarely (perhaps with the exception of Margit Anna) relied on a consistent and well-defined artistic formula. More often, they looked to broad and idiosyncratic potentialities implicit in European Modernism.

This stylistic eclecticism and attachment to French art as a source of inspiration was a by-product of the general character of the Hungarian art scene and in particular of the collective experience of the artists affiliated with the European School. For instance, Ferenc Martyn (illus. 3) spent many years in Paris, where towards the end of his stay he developed a close relationship

with the members of the Abstraction-Création group. He continued to use the abstract-decorative stylistic approach he developed in the early 1940s when he returned to Hungary and settled in Pécs. The stylistic approach of the aforementioned Group of Abstract Artists had a similar provenance. In 1947 the group's members participated in the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles in Paris.<sup>6</sup> The European School also gathered artists who were sympathetic to the ideals of Social Realism.

One also has to mention the local context. For a significant number of artists affiliated with the European School, the loosely knit environment of the art colony in Szentendre provided their immediate historic and conceptual lineage. The Szentendre colony, established in the 1930s and located in one of suburban towns of Budapest, was led by the painters Imre Ámos and Lajos Vajda. Within their sphere of influence, a rather original artistic programme developed that may not have had well-defined contours, but possessed a distinct ideological backbone formed through a synthesis between modern (French) art and local folk tradition. Although it was influenced by such Modernist masters as Pablo Picasso, it also stressed the validity and value of the 'folk-derived' work of Béla Bartók. One could think of Szentendre as a bridge to the European School and its historically most immediate local reference point.

However, the most interesting aspect of the formation and function of the European School, especially within the East European context of the second half of the 1940s, was its relationship to Surrealism. In 1947 some Hungarian artists discussed the possibility of forming a Surrealist group and joining the international, leftist, revolutionary faction of the movement.<sup>7</sup> Nothing concrete came of those discussions. However, this is not the only evidence that points to an interest in Surrealism within the milieu of the European School. Its influence is much more apparent in the general referencing of the suggestive and metaphoric function of the image and in preference for a more or less Surrealist Parisian art scene. The key figure within those sympathies was of course Pablo Picasso, whose significance for East European art of this period cannot be easily overstated.<sup>8</sup> However, echoes of other artists, Arshile Gorky, André Masson, Joan Miró, among others, can also be seen in works of painters such as Tamás Lossonczy (illus. 5), Dezső Korniss or Julia Vajda. In this context, Dezső Korniss is once again particularly interesting because his range and eclecticism of stylistic approaches reveal the peculiar character of this period.<sup>9</sup>

In Hungary, this type of artistic attitude was, to a certain extent, a legacy of the 1930s. Lajos Németh claims, for instance, that the European School's interest in Surrealism can be traced back to the pre-war Szentendre environment and more specifically to the influence of the two leaders of the group, Vajda and Ámos, on the painters of the younger generation. He

4. Endre Bálint,  
*Worm (Death)*,  
1949.  
Szombathelyi  
Képtár.



mentions in particular Margit Anna, Endre Bálint (illus. 4), Korniss (illus. 6) and Béla Bán, who were also influenced by Surrealism for a short period.<sup>10</sup> In the Szentendre context, Surrealism provided a method for engaging the uncanny, grotesque and metaphoric, rather than for making specific art-historic references, as was the case in Czech art. Hungarian attitudes towards Surrealism retained this form after the war. However, Surrealism's post-war

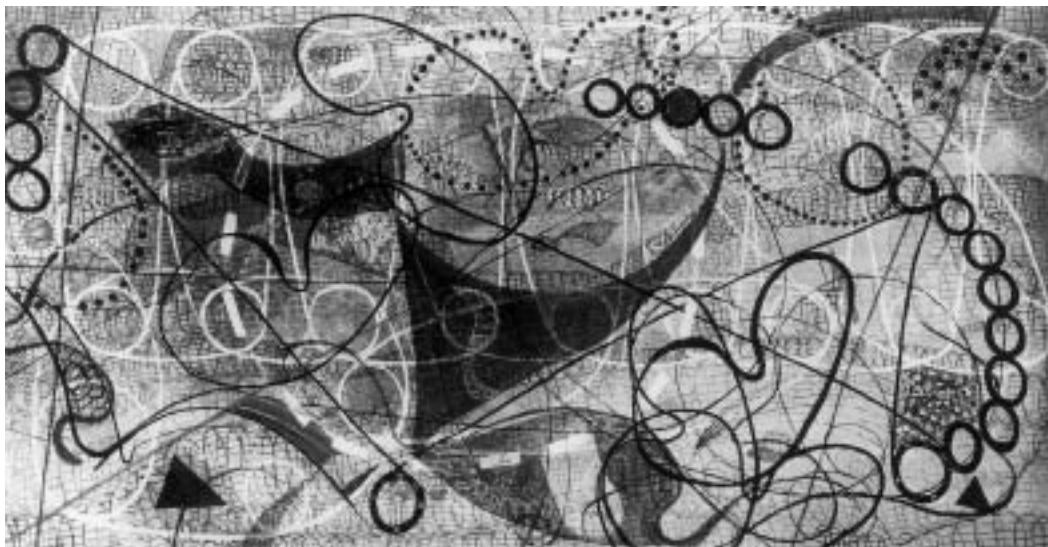
reception, especially in the context of ‘European’ orientation, points to an ideological understanding that was largely absent during the interwar period. After the war, Surrealism was not only associated with freedom of imagination, but also with a new worldview of post-war Europe. In 1947 Pál Kiss, Arpád Mezei and Imre Pán wrote:

There is only one world . . . [The] art (and science) of modern Europe must represent that unity about which we so often forget . . . The method that allows us to realize the unity of our existence is within our grasp. It was revealed by the living art and the new science, and its greatest possibilities were expressed precisely by Surrealism. This word, and with it the artistic style, is very poorly understood in Hungary. Sur-reality does not mean higher reality, but reality considered on a higher and better plane. Similarly, *surhomme* does not signify super-humanity as such, but humanity of a higher order.<sup>11</sup>

Referring to ‘the Surrealist method’, the Hungarian critics claimed that one could attain a unity between that which exists and that which does not, that which is known and that which is not, that which is conscious and that which is not, a unity of all planes of existence; in short, a unity of reality as a whole. This unity did not, however, reveal itself in the real practice of everyday life, but in the sphere of consciousness.

The ideological and political implications of this discourse became especially important within the context of the so-called ‘debate about abstraction’ (1946–8), which took place at the moment when new tensions were

5. Tamás  
Lossonczy,  
*Composition*,  
1947. Private  
collection.



beginning to emerge around cultural policies advocated and implemented by those connected with the Russian-supported Hungarian Communist Party. One of the main ideologues of socialist art and critics of the avant-garde was a well-known Marxist philosopher and Soviet expatriate, György Lukács. Within the scope of the debate about abstraction, Surrealism was supposed to function as a counterweight to the developing doctrine of Socialist Realism. Its broader perspective on European culture, which espoused the utopia of European unity, contrasted sharply with the new cultural policies of the Communist regime.

Storm clouds were gathering over the skies of the old world, especially over its 'new' part. The political processes that were already underway pointed in a different direction from that anticipated by the Hungarians. The unity of European culture, less and less possible in reality, was becoming increasingly 'sur-real', achievable only on some higher plane of abstract spirituality. It was literally turning into a u-topia, a no-place. This understanding of Surrealism within utopian categories of the unified European culture took on a specific meaning: not of the 'sur-reality' postulated by the authors of the European School's manifesto, but of 'un-reality'. It reflected the fact that Europe was being divided by the steadily growing Iron Curtain (though in the 1940s it was only barely visible). Instead of the East and the West coming together, the two geographic parts of the continent were turning their backs on each other. Cultural politics in the East, foreshadowed by the Hungarian debate about abstraction, were increasingly directed towards the goal of creating a party-



6. Dezső  
Korniss,  
*Cradle II*, 1945.  
Kassák  
Múzeum,  
Budapest.

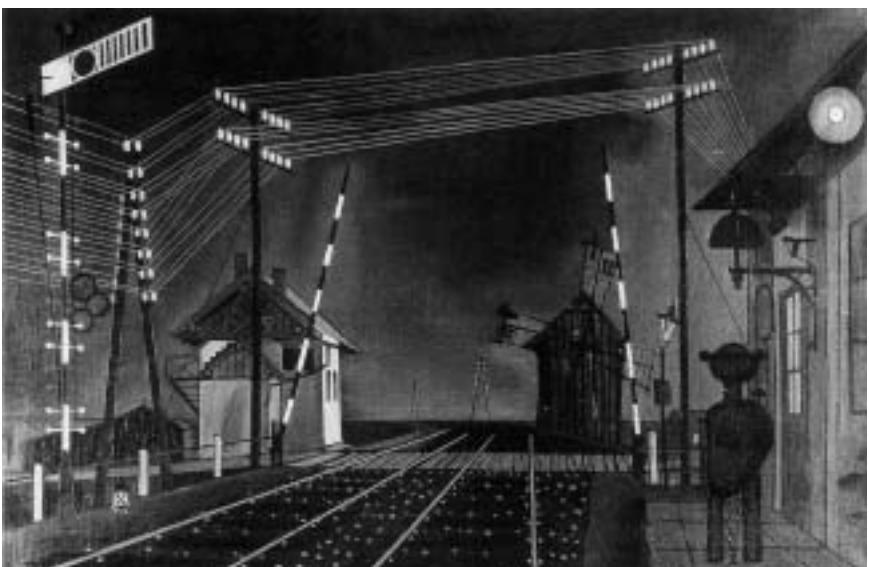
based culture of the Eastern ‘brave new world’, a culture based entirely on the Soviet models. Similarly, Western politics operated within their own geographic, cultural, and economic sphere. If the West evinced interest in the East, it did so only as an expression of a certain type of exoticism, or as an interest in the reflection of its own, Western culture. It was during this period, towards the end of 1940s, that the process described by Milan Kundera as the ‘tragedy of Europe’ began. It culminated in 1956 during the Hungarian Uprising, when the West stood by and watched, implementing its policy of non-intervention into the internal affairs of the Soviet Union, as the Soviet troops entered Budapest. The dramatic appeal made by the director of the Hungarian News Agency, ‘we are going to die for Hungary and for Europe’,<sup>12</sup> and transmitted into the ether at the moment when the Russian tanks were entering the city, recalls the ethos of the European School’s manifesto. But it was made too late. The Europe described by the Hungarian intellectuals in 1945 no longer existed; at most, it had an ‘un-real’ character.

There was a very different situation in Czechoslovakia. Here, Surrealism was a home-grown product, not a self-conscious import. Art historians have long noted the significance of Czech Surrealism together with its originality and dynamic character.<sup>13</sup> Even André Breton acknowledged as much in a speech made on 29 March 1935 in Prague, when he stated that Surrealism developed along parallel trajectories in Prague and in Paris. He added that its presence along the banks of the Vltava bears witness to the fact that Surrealism was an international phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> According to František Šmejkal, Breton chose Prague as a place from which to launch the project of the international expansion of Surrealism because he believed that the city’s *genius loci* harmonized extremely well with the ‘spirit of Surrealism’. Prague was seen as ‘the magical metropolis of the old Europe’, a place transformed by the eccentric emperor Rudolf II into a centre of art, alchemy and astrology. It is not surprising, continues Šmejkal, that the city was, in a certain sense, chosen as the capital of the international movement.<sup>15</sup> As a matter of fact, notes the Czech art historian, it was here that Karel Teige published in 1924 *The First Manifesto of Poetism*, a few months ahead of Breton’s *First Manifesto of Surrealism*. Teige’s text pointed the way for the Czech avant-garde, which within the visual arts had a decidedly Surrealist character from the end of the 1920s through the 1930s.<sup>16</sup> This coincidence of dates, one could almost say their parallelism, must be a key feature of any discussion of international and Czech Surrealism, despite a number of differences between the two manifestos and the two art movements.

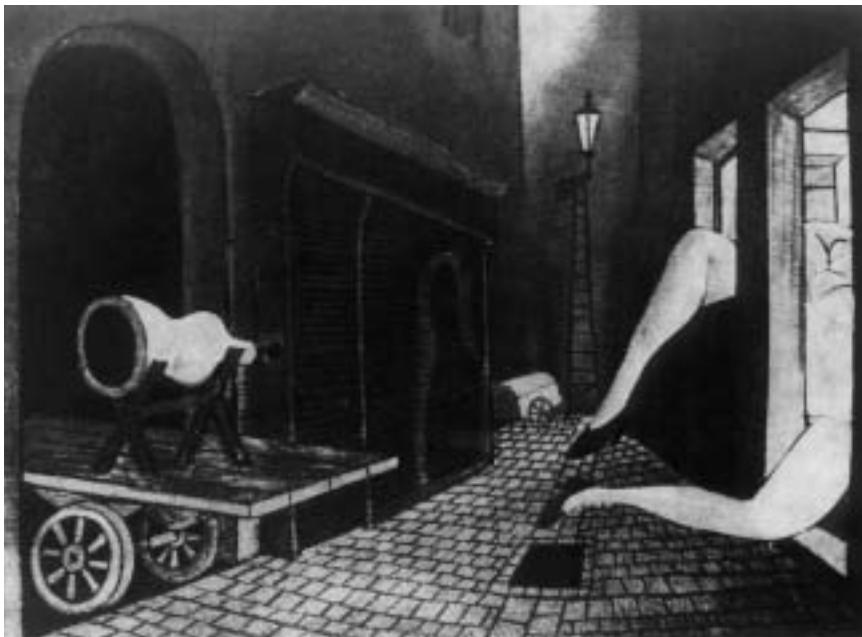
It is clear that the war, with its daily routine, modified Czech artists’ interest in Surrealism somewhat. An example of this process can be seen in the

work produced within the context of a collective that did not develop a cohesive programme but that nevertheless created a common environment and appeared under an adopted name as Group 42. The group, which was formed in 1942, comprised mainly artists who before the war had had connections with Surrealism. They included, among others, the painters František Gross and František Hudeček (the latter was not present at the inaugural meeting of the group, which took place on 27 October 1942), the sculptor Ladislav Zivr, the younger artists Jiří Kolář and Jan Kotík, and the art theorists and critics Jindřich Chalupecký and Jiří Kotalík. The group systematically enlarged its membership and functioned, in effect, as a focal point for a significant gathering of artists who represented a diverse range of art specialties within visual arts (including photography) and literature.<sup>17</sup> During the war, Group 42 organized a significant number of meetings and exhibitions in private studios, some of which were retrospective and were accompanied by theoretical statements. Their activities attest to a high degree of artistic resilience in occupied Prague.

Among the artists of Group 42, the works of František Hudeček reveal a particularly interesting evolution. In the 1930s his paintings were definitely located within the scope of Surrealism.<sup>18</sup> However, during the war, the artist frequently looked to Neue Sachlichkeit for models (see for instance his *Railway Station with a Windmill*; illus. 7). While he moved into this then popular figurative pictorial mode by relying on the iconography of a desolate city and invoking the mysterious atmosphere of an urban landscape (see for instance works of Kamil Lhoták and Jan Smetana), he did not entirely abandon



7. František Hudeček, *Railway Station with a Windmill*, 1941. National Gallery, Prague.



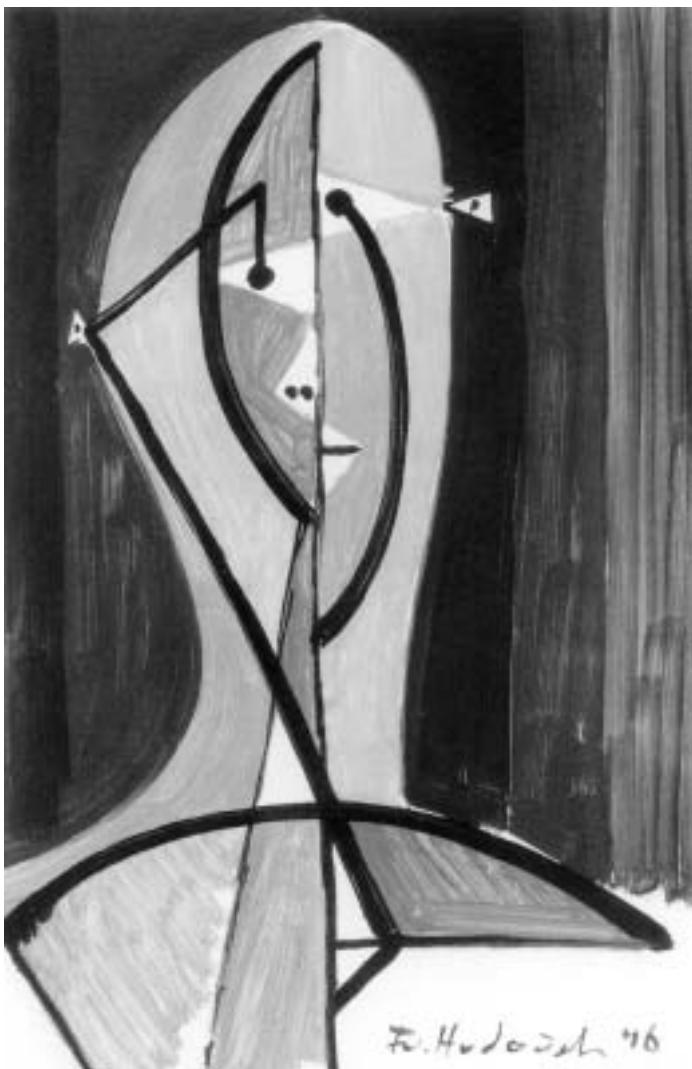
8. František Hudeček, *Dead-end Street*, 1943. National Gallery, Prague.

Surrealism. Hudeček continued to engage the poetic language of that movement (see for instance *Dead-end Street*; illus. 8). In the second half of the 1940s he moved towards a more contemporary approach to Modernism, based to a large extent on French art located at the edges of the Surrealist tradition, namely the work of Picasso and geometric abstraction (illus. 9).

In the post-war period the artists of Group 42 did not stay focused solely on France. For instance, they were exposed to modern Spanish Republican art through an exhibition which featured the work of twelve artists, including Picasso, from the 1940s. Travelling from Prague to Brno, the show was a great success and formed the basis for mutual interest and future contacts.<sup>19</sup> Paris, however, remained for Czechs the main point of reference. It is important to note that the curiosity was mutual. Along the banks of the Seine, the interest in Czech art was disproportionately greater than in art of any other East European country. This accounts for the enthusiastic reception of the exhibition 'Art Tchéchoslovaque' organized by Galerie La Broëtie. The show, which was well attended by the Parisian cultural elite, opened on 14 June 1946. It featured works by the artists affiliated with Group 42 as well as members of the Group RA.<sup>20</sup> A few months later, in 1947, Gallery Maeght hosted a large international exhibition of Surrealism. Curated by André Breton and Marcel Duchamp, the show included works by Jindřich Heisler and Toyen, the *doyens* of the Czech avant-garde, among others. The exhibition travelled – in a somewhat reduced

form – to Prague in October 1947. The accompanying catalogue included a text written by Breton and Karel Teige. The poster for the show was designed by Victor Brauner. The only Czech artist participating in the Prague show was Toyen.<sup>21</sup>

The aforementioned Group RA, which with the help of the European School had an exhibition in Hungary,<sup>22</sup> constitutes an interesting feature of the Czech Surrealist landscape.<sup>23</sup> It gathered together younger artists who, unlike the members of Group 42, did not have any pre-war experience with the classic phase of Surrealism. Jindřich Chalupecký wrote that '[they] were



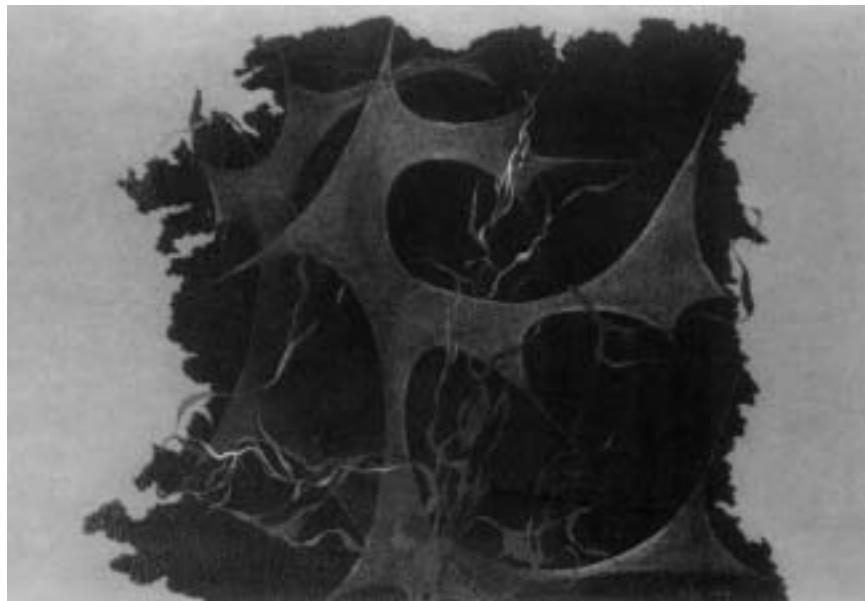
g. František  
Hudeček,  
*Head XIII*, 1946.  
National  
Gallery, Prague.

inspired by Surrealism, but were much more interested in the poetics of the image' than in representation of the world, which still attracted the artists of Group 42.<sup>24</sup> They appeared on the Czech art scene as 'Younger Surrealists', and from the beginning formed an interdisciplinary collective: Josef Istler, Bohdan Lacina, Václav Tikal and Václav Zýkmund were painters, Miloš Koreček and Vilém Reichmann worked in photography, Ludvík Kundera and Zdeněk Lorenc were writers. Karel Teige, a legendary figure within the Czech avant-garde, provided inspiration for yet another group of younger Czech artists sympathetic to the tradition of Surrealism, which included, among others, Jan Kotik and Anna and Libor Fára, as well as Emila and Mikuláš Medek. Teige functioned for those younger artists as a moral support and inspiration, especially during the period immediately after the Communist coup (Teige died in 1951), when the art of the Czech avant-garde, including Surrealism, was once again (after the Nazi persecution of modern art) officially suppressed and not shown publicly.

Surrealism provided young Czech artists not only an artistic but also a historic point of reference through which they could develop a link to the great tradition of the Czech avant-garde. Seen in this context, their interest could be interpreted as a symptom of their self-professed commitment to the non-conformist tradition of modern art, rather than a desire to maintain Surrealism as a movement. The paintings produced by some of those artists, for instance Josef Istler (illus. 10), who, according to Chalupecký, was 'the closest to abstraction',<sup>25</sup> reveal a certain detachment from classic Czech Surrealism. Those rather Expressive works, which relied on the uncanny and the mysterious and engaged in exploration of psychological tensions, were a significant departure from the 'Parisian' poetics of the aforementioned artists, such as Hudeček. For instance, Istler, experimenting with abstract forms, was closer in his sensibility to the international COBRA movement, which in 1949 had two major exhibitions in Europe.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Mikuláš Medek, somewhat gentler in his approach than Istler and using the calmer poetics of the 'unusual' instead of the uncanny, approached the French model of image-making formed in the 1940s with reserve. But, in contrast to Istler, for a considerable period of time he too embraced the approach of classic Surrealist artists, in particular magical realism. Adela Nádvorníková eloquently summed up the attitudes of the 'Younger Surrealists':

Istler is a 'Surrealist in painting' (also in drawing and frottage), Tikal is a 'Surrealist in nostalgia', Fára 'in summer games', Medek 'in anger and against his will', and Medková 'twice as much and in isolation'.<sup>27</sup>

10. Josef Istler,  
*Cobwebs*, 1944.  
National  
Gallery, Prague.



In the early 1950s Medek observed that he still saw Surrealism as an important reference, but no longer considered it a coherent artistic programme.<sup>28</sup> By then, the twenty-plus year long period of Czech Surrealism was at its end. Its final climax took place in mid-1953, shortly after Stalin's death, when two issues of the album-anthology *Object* were released outside the official distribution channels.<sup>29</sup>

In Czechoslovakia, Surrealism, which functioned as the main tendency of the Czech avant-garde (the way Cubism had done earlier), did not have to be revalorized after the war. It was seen as a remedy for the Nazi occupation and, after the Communist takeover, for the indoctrinated Socialist Realism. It was also perceived by many Czech artists as their 'own', a national fragment of the history of modern art. In Poland, paradoxically, a similar role was played by Constructivism, which functioned as the main tendency of the national avant-garde tradition, though the full extent of its importance did not become apparent until after the 'thaw' of the mid-1950s. According to Tadeusz Kantor, a key figure of the Polish post-war avant-garde, in Poland 'there was no Surrealism, because Poland was ruled by Catholicism'.<sup>30</sup> Is it possible that Polish Catholicism felt more affinity for the Constructivist abstractions, circles, squares and rectangles than for Surrealist oneiric iconography, which frequently employed erotic motifs? As a matter of fact, one could easily imagine that the prudish Polish public as well as similarly minded intellectuals would have been the first in line to gather signatures for an anti-pornography petition after seeing wonderful work by Jindřich Štyrský, for instance his cycle *Movable*

*Cabinet* (1934), or an issue of the Czech journal from approximately the same period, unambiguously titled *Erotická revue* (*The Erotic Review*). They would have reacted well before any righteous bishop realized that something ‘disturbing’ was happening in the art. Clearly, avant-garde practice consisting primarily of the painting of geometric abstractions that could be rationalized through an intellectual discourse was much closer to the mental (and sensual) attitudes of the Polish cultural elite than were the themes of the body, gender or erotic humour. However, despite this background, by the second half of the 1940s, Surrealism began to play a considerable role in Polish art as well.

Mieczysław Porębski noted that although Poland did not possess a homegrown tradition of Surrealism, with the exception of a few highly marginalized and understated examples, Surrealist problematic began to attract the attention of the younger artists and critics during the period of the Nazi occupation. They did not have a rich store of material at their disposal: ‘only one issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* and a pre-war issue of [the Polish journal] *Nike* with an article by Blumówna [about Surrealism].’<sup>31</sup> But the lack of knowledge did not matter; what did was a certain atmosphere of nihilism, an anarchist attitude ‘which rejected every dogma’. This atmosphere functioned as a kind of tonic for the reality of the Nazi occupation. Porębski observes that the interest in Surrealism constituted an attempt to create a ‘different’ point of reference, a method not only for how to survive the difficult material, existential and political circumstances, but also, and above all, for how to find a language able to describe that situation, a language different from the one on which the war generation was raised during the interwar period and which now failed them.<sup>32</sup>

Porębski’s recollections have great value and significance, which so far have not been noted by either Polish historians or cultural critics. One could even say that they have been ignored by the Polish intellectuals because they reveal a different dimension of the intellectual biography of the war generation. According to Porębski, and contrary to prevalent views, their main activity consisted of discussions about Surrealism, associated by reputation with something quite different than a patriotic obligation to serve the nation. It had nothing to do with military conspiracies and armed actions of guerilla warfare. Porębski also suggests that the language of military conspiracy, associated with the underground Home Army (Armia Krajowa) and subsequently heroicized by the Polish historiography, was an extension of the language that ‘failed’ the war generation. It did not offer a possibility of redefinition of identity in a new situation and under a new paradigm. Unfortunately, those types of historic revisions have not been well received by the Polish centres of public opinion. For that reason, a statement that notes the primacy of Surrealism (understood

as a general attitude towards the world) over the language of the ‘official underground’, and which certainly constitutes a significant challenge to the current ways of thinking about the war period, nevertheless deserves careful consideration. Its significance rests in its potential not only to reveal the local specificity of Surrealism’s status in Poland, but also to contribute to a production of a different intellectual history of the region.

Surrealism filled the linguistic vacuum of the interregnum at the moment when the old system of describing the world had lost its appeal (not to say, ‘went bankrupt’), and the new system, with its intellectual and political temptations, had not yet appeared, or at least was not yet considered attractive. The leftist character of this attitude could be seen within the circle of prominent artists with whom Porębski associated, but it appeared in a rather specific form – through literature. They learned about the Bolshevik Revolution from Boris Pilniak’s *The Naked Year* (1928), one of the most interesting descriptions of the period, which is devoid, however, of any heroization of the revolution, its politics or ideology, and which presents a ‘straightforward’ existential landscape of the period. They also learned to recognize fascism through literary works such as Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932), rather than Marxist ideological analysis. Of course, this environment also included artists with explicitly leftist views, such as Alfred Lenica and Jerzy Kujawski, but even they ‘processed them through Surrealism’.<sup>33</sup> Kujawski emigrated to Paris after the war and was the only Polish painter to participate in the earlier mentioned 1947 International Exhibition of Surrealism. Leftist chic was all-pervasive. But it took the form of a Surrealist flavouring of the artistic atmosphere, rather than an ideologically engaged discourse. In other words, it functioned as an element of the general artistic attitude rather than a fragment of a political worldview.

It would be difficult to compare the Kraków wartime interest in Surrealism with the art historic significance of the Czech Group 42. In Kraków there were no artists with biographic connections to pre-war Surrealism, like Hudeček, or theorists seriously exploring the language of Surrealism, like Chalupecký. Here Surrealism was an intimate, virtually private, nihilist-anarchist response to the war, which was understood not only in terms of physical violence, individual terror and national persecution, but also as a function of a crisis of values and general breakdown of the old worldview. After the war, during the brief period of the interregnum, Surrealism began to function in a different way, similar to Hungary, or even to Czechoslovakia during the period of the ‘Younger Surrealists’. Here too Surrealism became identified with an attitude conveying a general intellectual atmosphere of post-war Eastern Europe, rather than a concrete artistic programme.

There was a brief moment at the end of 1948 that focused the processes involved in the ending of the interregnum and the growing interest in Surrealism, fostered by the spreading fame of the exhibition organized at the Gallery Maeght in Paris. It coincided with the opening in Kraków of the *First Exhibition of Modern Art*. The show marked both the beginning and the end of the public presence of Surrealism in Polish art. During the period of the ‘thaw’, that is, from 1956, other problems relating to a different world appeared. However, they were expressed, according to Tadeusz Kantor, in the visual language of abstraction, *Art informel* and tachism.<sup>34</sup> Although much later there would be a return to metaphoric expression relying on the grotesque, seen for instance in the exhibition *Metaphors* curated by Mieczysław Porębski and Ryszard Stanisławski at the Warsaw Gallery Zachęta in 1962, that realignment would speak to a totally different historic and artistic problematic.<sup>35</sup> Besides, in 1949, at the time when the *First Exhibition of Modern Art* was being closed in Kraków, Porębski was in Paris, where ‘Surrealism was [already] in its death throes’.<sup>36</sup> After the Maeght show, the visibility of Surrealism on the international art scene diminished significantly as the answers it was able to provide became less and less relevant for the changing (visually and conceptually) world.

The *First Exhibition of Modern Art* appears to have been a culmination of both Surrealism and a certain culture of the 1940s, understood as the period of interregnum. It ended an art-historic process that began during the war with the ‘underground’ meetings of the Kraków avant-garde, or, to be more precise in locating a particular moment, with the exhibition of young Kraków artists organized under conspiratorial conditions in 1943 in the apartment of Ewa Siedlecka.<sup>37</sup>

One could identify several Kraków artists who travelled to Paris (among them Jerzy Kujawski, who resided there permanently after the war) who were familiar with Surrealism and processed it in a variety of ways, or, like Bogusław Szwacz, rejected it after a short engagement, at least in terms of publicly made declarations.<sup>38</sup> The main figure associated with those peregrinations was Tadeusz Kantor (illus. 11), who was among the first to see the works of the French Surrealists in 1947 and also brought back their publications and catalogues. Among others, he was responsible for bringing to Kraków André Breton’s book *Surrealism and Painting*. It is also likely that it was he who brought to Kraków a copy of the famous catalogue of the Maeght exhibition designed by Marcel Duchamp, which featured a naked female breast on the cover (he was not able to afford the deluxe edition of the catalogue featuring a three-dimensional plastic mould of a breast).<sup>39</sup>

It is interesting, in so far as the culture of Eastern Europe is concerned, that sometimes contact with Surrealism came for the artists of the region from

11. Tadeusz Kantor, *Super-Movements*, 1948. National Museum, Poznań.



a different direction, namely from the south. Zbigniew Dłubak recalled that his first encounter with Surrealism took place before the war via the aforementioned article by Helena Blum (or Blumówna) that was published in 1939 in the Polish journal *Nike*. However, he also had an opportunity to familiarize himself with Czech Surrealism through Zdenek Sekal during their

incarceration in the concentration camp at Mauthausen (Marian Bogusz was also imprisoned there). After the war, on the way back home, Dłubak stayed for a short period in Prague, where he could directly observe the local art scene.<sup>40</sup> There were many more instances of contacts between Polish and Czech artists, a number of which were instigated with an express desire to learn more about Czech art. For instance, Jindřich Chalupecký visited Poland after the war and František Hudeček had an exhibition of his works there.<sup>41</sup>

However, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the influence of Paris counted the most. Kantor's works from the 1940s reveal the artist's interest in Matta, whose paintings he saw in Paris. Kazimierz Mikulski looked to Joan Miró (illus. 12), Alfred Lenica (illus. 13) to André Masson, not to mention copious references to Picasso.<sup>42</sup> Naturally a number of works included in the *First Exhibition of Modern Art* revealed a more or less independent character, but it would be difficult to compare them with Parisian art. This is particularly true with regards to the paintings by two exceptional Polish female artists, Maria Jarema and Jadwiga Madziarska, as well as those by Jerzy Nowosielski. However, in general, the 'spirit' of Parisian Modernism pervaded the exhibition. Moreover, this influence appeared as something quite natural since many of the artists still maintained personal contacts with Paris. Some of them were even participating in the Parisian art scene and maintaining permanent links with the European capital of Modernism. For instance, Jerzy Malina and Bogusław Szwacz participated in the third Salon des Réalités Nouvelles. Porębski also noted that the conception, organization and arrangement of the *First Exhibition* drew significantly on models provided by Surrealist shows.<sup>43</sup>

If one considers Porębski's speech delivered at the opening of the *First Exhibition* to the gathered audience, which included representatives of the Communist authorities, one is bound to notice that a certain game is being played around Surrealism. On the one hand there is a clear expression of interest in Surrealism, manifested in the materials the critic used to prepare his essay, in particular his citations of texts by André Breton.<sup>44</sup> On the other, there is a perceptible effort to establish a conceptual and discursive distance. Porębski observed that:

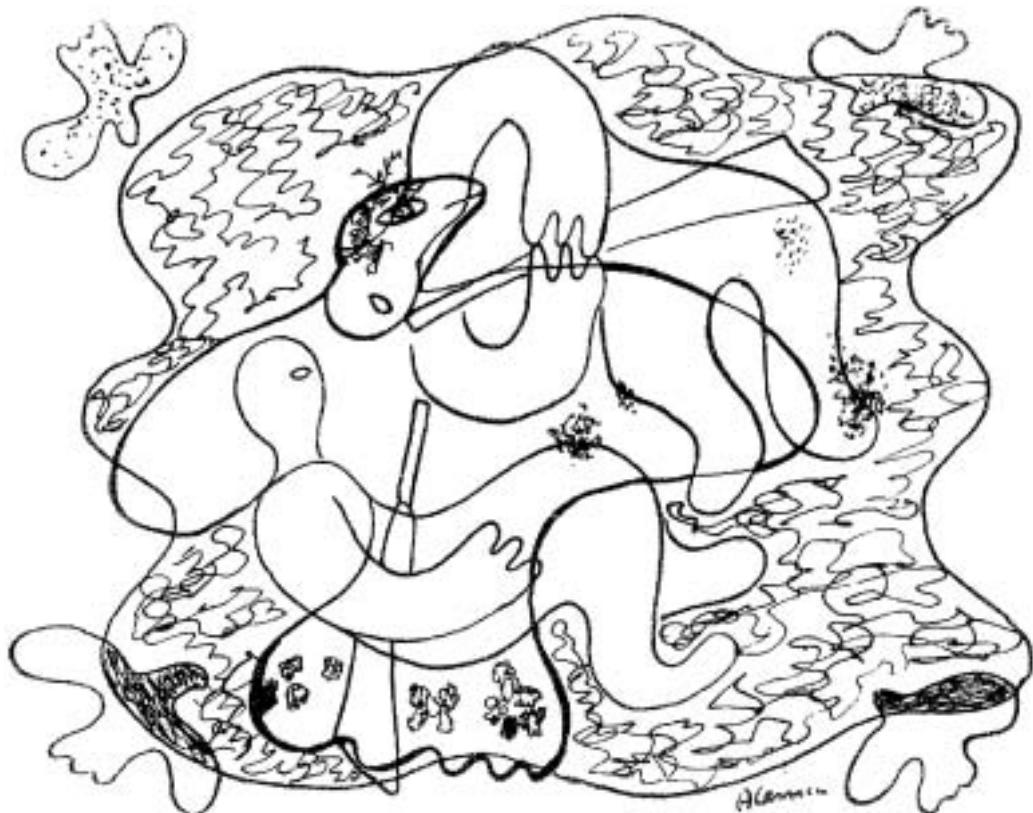
Surrealist art does not have a formal aesthetic. All the means are allowed and practised; anything can serve the particular objective of a free and unencumbered movement of imagination, unconstrained by any rules of construction. . . To create Surrealist art, the artist's imagination had to lose sight of the real object . . . it had to abandon its faith in the self-sufficient sense of constructive effort . . . it had to find itself by itself, within its own world, unrestrained by any norms, over which it did not rule but to which it submitted, identifying freedom with inertia. It is difficult to negate [the fact] that Surrealism was a revolt of passive

imagination, doubting, incapable of positive concentration. It revealed emptiness of its own world, but it could not overcome it.<sup>45</sup>

These words have the tone of a funeral oration for East European Surrealism. At the same time, the new political reality demonstrated that the ‘real object’ defined by the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe according to the models provided by Big Brother would become the only possible option for art practice, rather than ‘free imagination’. If those words were supposed to perform a strategic function, if they were intended to convince the Communist decision makers familiar with the dialectic method that Polish modern paintings rooted in Surrealism could somehow break the movement’s ‘inertia’, they did not accomplish their goal. On 19 January 1949, less than a month after it opened, the *First Exhibition of Modern Art* was closed by the authorities.



12 Kazimierz  
Mikulski,  
*Cricket over  
the City on  
a Holiday  
Afternoon*,  
1948.  
National  
Museum,  
Warsaw.



The meaning of Surrealism in post-war Poland, in particular when examined in the context of the *First Exhibition*, appears to have been somewhat different from that ascribed to it within the Kraków art world around 1943. If during the Nazi occupation Surrealism provided an intellectual alternative to politically engaged thinking and offered an opportunity for more profound, existential reflection situated outside historic paradigms, then by the end of 1940s it was functioning as the primary manifestation of the Modernist movement, in a way analogous to other countries of Eastern Europe, particularly Hungary. Without a doubt, the fame of the *International Exhibition of Surrealism* reinforced this type of reception. Surrealism also shifted from an existential position to a political one. If the Kraków exhibition was supposed to convince the Communist authorities that they should support modern art instead of Socialist Realism because modern art was better suited to support the political and social changes taking place in a country still recovering after the period of Nazi occupation (one of the main goals of the exhibition was to secure a broad audience for modern art), then Surrealism certainly functioned

13 Alfred  
Lenica,  
Drawing, 1948.

in this context as the main carrier of that notion of modernity. When Porębski and Kantor opened the *First Exhibition*, they also saw modernity, to a lesser or greater extent, through the lenses of Surrealism. But Porębski could not state that fact openly in his remarks. Dłubak, the author of the second speech delivered at the opening, many years later admitted: ‘We wanted to demonstrate that avant-garde work conformed to the Marxist dialectic. We wanted, in some way, to attach our work to the slogan of “Socialist Realism”’.<sup>46</sup> One could see Porębski’s speech in this way. While he appears to have been saying ‘we reject Surrealism in the name of the socialist reality’, the exhibition itself presented a different message. It offered a survey of modern art based largely in the tradition of Surrealism.

This tension between the image and text was a response to the attitude of the Communist authorities, which believed in statements and consecrated language. Only statements counted in their processing of reality, artistic or otherwise. Any statement about the world had a status of reality; the appearance of the world was considered a simulacrum. Organizing the *First Exhibition*, Porębski, irrespective of his political views, could count on such dissonance. He could reasonably expect that the Communists would believe what he said (and what was written) and not what they actually saw. A similar strategy was also used in Hungary, where Surrealist visuality (or more broadly modern visuality) was sometimes linked to Marxist dialectic, a move that in and of itself was not so far removed from Breton’s original conception.<sup>47</sup> However, as I mentioned earlier, in Hungary thinking in the categories of ‘European utopia’ was much more common. The artists of the European School saw in Surrealism a tool for creating a new European worldview and for building a cultural unity of Europe. That utopia functioned as an alternative to the other utopian vision promoted by the Communist Party. The organizers of the *First Exhibition* saw things in a similar light: Surrealism (and more broadly modernity) represented not only artistic but also political position and as such was integral to the tactical manouevres involved in the selection of the ‘new king’ during the period of the interregnum.

In a certain sense, the political discourse surrounding Surrealism could be seen as a microcosm of the general attitude of the progressive East European intellectuals and their struggle to come to terms with the historic processes set in motion after the end of the World War II. This observation also pertains to Czech intellectuals, who did not get excited over Duchamp’s catalogue featuring a bare breast and for whom Surrealism was a much more natural form of expression. The political significance of Surrealism in Czechoslovakia during the 1940s had a somewhat different character from elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Certainly Czechs had a strong tradition of thinking about art

in political terms. This attitude was particularly pervasive in the 1930s. Jindřich Chalupecký, one of the key cultural critics of the period, commenting in 1936 on statements made by Karel Teige, wrote: ‘Every art, simply because it is art, is dangerous to a society. Every art, in its demand for freedom, its demand for life, its demand for love and in its desire is subversive’.<sup>48</sup> Two years later he further refined his thesis, this time in a more specific context of a discussion of Socialism. He wrote:

Socialism reveals the possibility of freedom, art gives it meaning. Socialism demands freedom for the humanity, art for the individual. Individual's self-realization in its entirely realized happiness and entire freedom is the goal of both socialism and of art.<sup>49</sup>

After the war, of the three aforementioned countries, Czechoslovakia was much more politically free and far less dependent on the Soviet Union than either Poland or Hungary. Until 1948 the threat of ‘unification’ under the banner of Socialist Realism was seen as a vague abstraction. Because of this, within the Czech cultural discourse there was far less strategic self-consciousness concerning Surrealism. There was also much more directly presented theory and faith in worldview pronouncements. Nevertheless, the emerging political situation was discussed here as well, though from a somewhat different perspective. The contents of those discussions clearly demonstrate growing awareness of the danger. To paraphrase the title of Chalupecký’s collection of essays, it indicated a consensus that culture should be ‘defended’. In 1946 the critic warned against ‘naïveté of thinking’, based in the conviction that the new social system required a new culture. He defended a broadly humanist approach to culture against the encroachments of political doctrine and the bureaucratization of cultural policies. Identifying culture as the offspring of ‘man and humanity’, he criticized reductivism of the new cultural policies. Chalupecký asked: ‘Is pessimistic, tragic Modernist poetry a product of bourgeois culture and will we recognize the products of socialist culture by their optimism?’ He answered: of course not, for a man always harbours elements of both sadness and happiness.<sup>50</sup> If Socialism is to save humanity from a crisis, it cannot reject its past cultural heritage; just the opposite, it must use it. Politics and culture move in accordance to a different rhythm: ‘The activities of the cultural worker are different than those of a politician’; however, this does not mean they are unrelated. The polarization of attitudes must come to an end: accusations directed by politicians against artists that they are ‘antisocial’ and practise ‘art for art’s sake’ must cease and so must charges levelled by artists against the politicians that ‘they cannot see beyond their own political system’, or venture beyond their ‘party line’.<sup>51</sup>

Chalupecký appealed for a resolution of tensions between political declarations about freedom and murky prospects facing artists living in the shadow of those pronouncements. The experience of the Soviet Union, in particular treatment of Russian poets such as Anna Achmatova and Nikolaj Tichonov, who were thrown out of the writers' union and thereby deprived of basic social benefits and state support for their work, did not inspire him with optimism. If greatness is the defining feature of Socialism, he wrote, then, in the name of that greatness, is it right to allow only those who practice philosophy needed by Socialism to practice philosophy, or to allow only those who falsify their poems to write poetry? Asserting that the present was a critical, transitional period (a reference to Engels), between 'the kingdom of boredom and the kingdom of freedom', he asked, is the transition supposed to have the character suggested by the fate of the Russian poets?<sup>52</sup> This time Chalupecký did not provide an answer; instead he ended his article with a telling ellipsis.

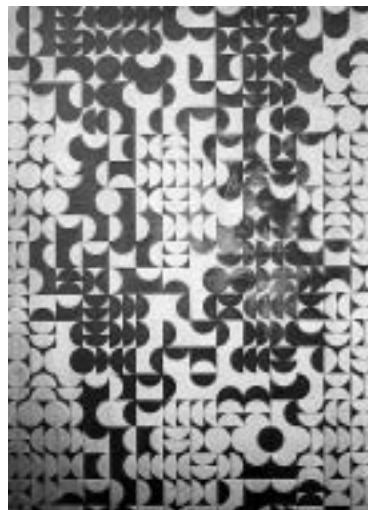
One could surmise that Chalupecký's statements reflected 'a voice within a discussion', a voice speaking within an 'uncensored discussion' still possible in Czechoslovakia. Unlike Porębski, the Czech critic did not have to resort to a dialectic strategy or to verbally distance himself from Surrealism while referencing it in his curatorial practice. Similarly, the idea of pursuing unclear visions of a European utopia (functioning as a substitute for the real, rapidly vanishing contact with European culture) was foreign not only to Chalupecký but to the entire Czech art scene. Neither could envision the possibility that Prague, 'the magical metropolis of the Old Europe', could find itself outside the cultural and political borders of the old continent. Czechoslovakia was still a country in which culture functioned in a similar way as it did during the interwar period, or at least in a much more similar way than it did in other countries of the region. Chalupecký could express directly his reservations regarding the cultural policies of Big Brother and wonder openly if his Czech followers understood the meaning of the word 'freedom'. Two years later, in a text that was supposed to be published in the third issue of *The Letters* magazine, but which did not appear because of the Communist coup, the critic even tried to engage Marxist philosophy of art. Taking on the problem of the responsibility of the artist, he used a Marxist perspective, but also appealed to the special status of art and the importance of its own, autonomous values. He was sincere in his effort to contribute to a serious theoretical discussion, one that did not resort to cynicism or strategic games.<sup>53</sup> However, it soon became clear that even in Czechoslovakia, a country with the best-developed tradition of democracy among all the East European countries and with guarantees of political freedom signed after World War II, the brief post-war period had a character of an interregnum. The ellipsis with which Chalupecký ended his

text on culture and politics in 1946 was indeed prophetic. Joseph Vissarianovich Stalin was preparing a very different future for the culture of Eastern Europe from that which any intellectual in the region could have foreseen. Discussions were no longer possible; neither were strategic discourses needed. By the end of the 1940s the situation was clear. The history of Surrealism in Eastern Europe, even in Czechoslovakia, came to an end with the Communist Party's declaration concerning artists' responsibility to create in accordance with Socialist Realism. The two last issues of the Czech Surrealist journal *Object* were never published.



Part 2

# Modernism and Totalitarianism





# 3

## The ‘Thaw’ and *Art Informel*

Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, a man whose influence over the course of European history would be difficult to overstate, died in Moscow in the evening of 5 March 1953. His impact on history can be measured not only by the sheer number of those murdered by his regime, among whom were citizens of virtually every country in the world, but also by the influence he exercised over the culture of an equally extensive area. That region included, but was not limited to, the eastern part of Europe. Stalin’s death marked the beginning of a long process of decline of the Communist system, which finally collapsed in 1989. That system used art as an integral part of its brutal strategy aimed at controlling the population of Eastern Europe. According to Anatol Lunacharsky, one of the key authors of Communist cultural ideology, the potential impact of art was far too great to be ignored by the state or left unexploited for its political usefulness. That view, expressed during the initial period during which Communist cultural policies were being formulated, was endorsed by the region’s regimes, in some instances, until the very end.<sup>1</sup>

Although the final decline of the Soviet empire would take many years, the first clear signs of the beginning of that end appeared almost immediately after Stalin’s death. They found expression in what Ilya Erenburg, one of the leading figures of the system, characterized as the ‘thaw’. The turmoil at the Kremlin manifested itself in the gradual disappearance of Stalin’s closest allies such as Lavrenti Beria, the feared and loathed head of the NKVD, the Soviet secret police. Their departure would eventually allow Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin’s successor, to deliver his famous ‘Secret Speech’ in the early 1956, in which he indicted Stalin for his crimes. There was a marked difference in response to Khrushchev’s address among rival Communist regimes of Eastern Europe, which revealed significant disparity in the political strategies and cultural policies of the different states within the so-called ‘people’s democracy’. In Poland, where the Stalinist period was already nearing its end, Khrushchev’s

'Secret Speech' was widely copied and distributed; however, in Romania the text of the speech was known only to the inner circle of the party leadership. Therefore it is not surprising that while in Poland the cultural 'thaw' was already under way in 1955, even before Khrushchev's address, in Romania it would start ten years later with the coming to power of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Of course, in Yugoslavia, a country which broke its ties with the USSR in 1948, Khrushchev's speech was not important insofar as the development of local cultural policies was concerned. The appearance there of *Art informel* painting in the late 1950s had little to do with the 'thaw'. Rather, it was motivated by the local character of the Yugoslav art scene, which was dominated, particularly in Belgrade, by conservative painters,<sup>2</sup> rather than by an entrenched tradition of Socialist Realism. Because of that context, Yugoslav *Art informel* should not be viewed as a direct (negative) response to Socialist Realism, at least not to the extent that it was in countries that were dominated politically by the Soviet Union. For that reason Yugoslav *Art informel* painting will not be considered in this chapter, which does not mean, of course, that the theme of Yugoslav art will be ignored in the following chapters. On the contrary, in those situations when it is possible to find shared cultural or political points of reference among the countries of the Eastern Bloc and Yugoslavia, the art of the latter will be discussed within a comparative analysis of the region.

The political dynamics of the 'thaw' in Eastern Europe cannot be contained within a unified frame provided by shared chronology. Not counting Yugoslavia, whose post-war history developed along a different path and, consequently, whose artistic culture functioned in the context of locally specific circumstances, Poland was the first to experience the effects of the post-Stalinist 'thaw'. There, the changes brought by the 'thaw' were permanent, despite vacillations and eventual political bankruptcy of Władysław Gomułka, the leader of the Polish Communist party. Initially celebrated as the national hero of the 'Polish October' of 1956, Gomułka departed in disgrace in the wake of his anti-Semitic, anti-intelligentsia campaign of 1968 and bloody suppression of workers' riots in Gdańsk and Szczecin in 1970, during which several dozen men were shot to death by the security forces. In a sense, Gomułka was lucky, if one compares his fate with that of his contemporary Nicolae Ceaușescu, the Communist leader of Romania, executed in 1989. Gomułka died of natural causes in his bed in 1982.

In Hungary, the processes that led to political changes were the most far-reaching, but the reaction against them was the most violent and brutal. The Hungarian Uprising of 1956, greeted with sympathy and hope by those on both sides of the Iron Curtain, inspired fear and panic among the Eastern as well as Western governments. It had a paradoxical impact on Hungarian

culture. On the one hand, it delayed ‘modernization’ of Hungarian art until the mid-1960s. It is worth noting that during the period from the suppression of the uprising to the late 1960s, the Hungarian regime gave permission for only one exhibition of modern art. The Spring Exhibition, held in Műcsarnok in 1957, was a real exception in terms of Hungarian cultural policies. On the other hand, due to the slow and gradual but systematic implementation of a ‘new economic policy’ by Janos Kadar, the Communist leader of Hungary from 1956 to 1988, which gave rise to the so-called ‘goulash Communism’, the processes of modernization rapidly gained momentum once they started. After all, the art of ‘new expression’, or neo-Expressionism, which was understood throughout Eastern Europe in the 1980s as a more or less open form of dissent, acquired in Hungary a virtually official status. The artists associated with neo-Expressionism represented the People’s Republic of Hungary at the 1986 Venice Biennale.

In Czechoslovakia, after initially largely cosmetic reforms implemented by the local Communist regime in the late 1950s, a more thorough ‘defrosting’ of the cultural policy began in earnest in the first half of the 1960s and gained momentum year by year until the spring of 1968. The Prague Spring ended on 21 August 1968 when Bulgarian, Polish, Hungarian, East German and Soviet troops entered the city, putting an end to the hopeful vision of ‘Socialism with a human face’. The subsequent period of so-called ‘normalization’, a dark episode in Czech and Slovak history, led to the development of a vibrant underground culture.

In contrast, the post-war culture of Bulgaria was characterized by permanent stagnation. Although shifts in the power alignment of the region, brought about by the deaths of Stalin and Beria, began affecting Bulgaria as early as 1954, when Todor Zhivkov, the Communist leader of the country from 1954 to 1989, began eliminating his political rivals, the changes in the staffing of political positions had a negligible impact on Bulgarian culture in general and visual arts in particular. This situation persisted into the 1980s, when Zhivkov was put under house arrest by the new government and began working on his memoirs, which were published a few years later.

The German Democratic Republic, due to its ‘frontline’ location, was in a particularly difficult position. The first instances of physical resistance against the Soviet regime took place there immediately after Stalin’s death. The Berlin Uprising, which took place on 17 June 1953 and was the most visible and violent episode of that resistance, created a considerable problem for the local political elites. That problem was ‘solved’ in a dialectic fashion by application of what Martin Damus termed ‘Stalinist de-Stalinization’.<sup>3</sup> The promised reforms awoke hopeful expectations among East German intellectuals and artists.

However, those hopes were quickly dashed. A resolution passed at the party conference held in Bitterfeld in April 1959 explicitly stated that the culture of the GDR was to be ‘socialist’ in character, which of course meant that it had to conform to the directives set by the Central Committee of the German Socialist Party of Unity. In a sense, the cultural ‘thaw’ in East Germany ended before it began. The construction in 1961 of the Berlin Wall functioned in this context as a palpable sign of the end of optimism. It eliminated the possibility of any, including physical, contact with the West, in particular with the ‘enemy number one’, West Germany. One could image the profound shock of the citizens of the GDR, who on the evening of the fatal night of 12 August 1961 could still cross the East/West German border freely, but who found that passage irrevocably closed the following morning. The GDR was a very sensitive spot in the Soviet system, a frontline zone. That is why the post-Stalinist Kremlin regime led by Khrushchev consistently supported Walter Ulbricht, a Stalinist *par excellence* responsible for the policy of ‘Stalinist de-Stalinization’.

It is certain that Stalin’s death encouraged expectations of the ‘thaw’ throughout Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, in most cases those expectations could be expressed only indirectly. Such masking of hope for a change was perhaps a sign of the times. It certainly provided a measure of the Stalinist subjugation of East European culture and indicated the ambiguity of the situation. The apprehension and caution were, as it turns out, entirely justified.

Two quite different paintings, produced in two different countries in different years, provide an illuminating example of this phenomenon: Tibor Csernus’s *Three Literary Editors* (illus. 14) and Harald Metzkes’s *Friends*. Csernus’s painting depicts an interior of a café with three men dressed in suits and ties, the proper attire of intellectuals, at least at that time. They are seated at a covered table on which one sees a bottle, a newspaper and an arrangement of glasses. It is a commonplace scene frequently depicted in European painting. Yet it is precisely because it is so ordinary that the image becomes interesting. Before 1989, Csernus’s work could not have been shown publicly in Hungary. In a way, the artist performed a revolutionary act, even if its radical character becomes apparent only in hindsight. He explicitly referred to the European tradition of the café culture, which functioned as the locus of the intellectual life, at the time when Communist ideology required depiction of quite different interiors populated by men dressed in a very different manner. Within the iconography of Socialist Realism, a writer would never appear at a café, a place associated by the ideologues of Marxism-Leninism with a reactionary bourgeois lifestyle, rather than with productive participation in the creation of a socialist society. Anatol Lunacharsky’s injunction cited at the beginning of this chapter explicitly acknowledged that socialism could not be

built without the participation of writers. A committed writer could not waste time in cafés; he had to participate in the daily life of the proletariat and implement the directives of its avant-garde leadership, namely the Communist Party. By rejecting the iconography of Socialist Realism, Csernus created a visual statement that contradicted that ideology in a fundamental way. It asserted the writers or the artists' right to autonomy and creative freedom unencumbered by party control. That freedom could not be found on the great construction sites of socialism, but only in cafés. Csernus wanted a return of the tradition of literary culture, within which the café was the embodiment of the mythology of political disengagement and personal freedom and represented a revolt against goal-oriented organization of the socialist society. The writer's right to sit at a café and write (or not write) poems was concomitant with his right to be different, to be unlike a bourgeois philistine (in the past) or a worker (in the present). The painting contains one more significant element that points to its negation of Socialist Realist painting practice. The collection of objects of everyday use on the table – wine glasses, a bottle, a newspaper – recalls, according to Katalin Keserü, the genre of 'a small still life' popular during Miklós Horthy's dictatorship (1920–44), which was condemned, together with the entire period of the admiral's rule, by the



14. Tibor Csernus,  
*Three Literary Editors*, 1955.  
Petőfi's Literature  
Museum,  
Budapest.



15. Harald Metzkes,  
*Friends*, 1957.  
Private collection.

Communists.<sup>4</sup> Here the specific context gives this seemingly nondescript interior, ordinary looking men and ephemeral, commonplace objects a deeply political meaning. Under the conditions of total subjugation and Socialist Realist terror, they express hope for a change, for a 'thaw' after a long, cold winter.

*Friends* (illus. 15), completed two years later by the East German artist Harald Metzkes, is likewise rooted in the local context of similar hopes and fears for the future. It was created at a moment when political changes were already well under way in the USSR. In the GDR the year 1957 witnessed two significant events: the publication of a special French issue of the *Bildende Kunst*, which presented a debate on Picasso, whose works were extremely popular among German artists looking to modern art for models, and the declaration by the Central Committee of the local Communist Party concerning 'ideological struggle in the service of socialist culture'. The painting, which, according to Karin Thomas, takes the form of a triptych in a reference to the work of Max Beckmann, is a group portrait of an intimate circle of East Berlin artists.<sup>5</sup> The scene takes place in one of the studios of the Academy of Fine Arts located at the Paris Square in Berlin, a fact confirmed by the Brandenburg Gate visible through the window. The first figure on the left in the central panel is the painter himself. He holds a large saw as if it were a double bass, an instrument associated with jazz that was very popular at the time among East German bohemia, yet considered decadent by the authorities. Manfred Böttcher, who became a legendary figure of the independent art scene of the GDR, stands next to Metzkes. The third man, smoking a pipe and separated

from Böttcher by a sitting waitress, is the sculptor Werner Stötzner. Perhaps the most interesting member of the group is the fifth individual, Ernst Schroeder, who stands at some distance from the rest. Dressed in fashionable clothes and holding a cigarette, he was a legendary figure not only for his art but also for his lifestyle. He frequently travelled to Paris (which may be indicated by his stylish suit) and, as a result, was well informed about the latest artistic trends sweeping this, the still undisputed capital of modern art. Karin Thomas argues that the slight but noticeable distance between Schroeder and the rest of the group points to his special status. One could say that Schroeder provides a semantic key to the painting. What is at stake here is the right to modernity – or, more precisely, to practise modern art. This theme is underscored by the scenes depicted in the side panels. Functioning as the backstage familiar from *Pittura Metafisica*, the wings of the triptych include a number of references to Picasso, in particular to his early works (a man with a trumpet, a man sleeping on a table and, on the other side, an acrobat dressed in dark tights), to Bernard Buffet (a figure of a woman holding a child), and to the still lifes of Giorgio Morandi (bottles in the bottom left corner of the left side panel). The picture expresses hope, but also a sense of foreboding that the barely begun ‘thaw’ may come to an untimely end. This interpretation is reinforced by two coffin-like trunks in the right panel, which may be read as a requiem of lost hopes for the freedom of artistic expression.

By painting a group portrait of his Berlin friends, Metzkes was already aware that the prospect for loosening the party’s grip on artistic culture may have been an illusion. He was right. In the GDR, the cultural ‘thaw’ never gained momentum. As a result, one could not find any abstract art in East Germany, at least not in the public sphere. *Art informel* painting was considered as the most complete incarnation of the notion of modernity, a perfect embodiment of the freedom of expression, and a sign of participation in the world’s most advanced contemporary art.

The situation was quite different elsewhere. On the other side of the Oder River, in Poland, 1957 marked the apogee of the cultural ‘thaw’. Tadeusz Kantor painted some of his best-known *Art informel* canvases: *Amarapura*, *Akonkagua* (illus. 16), *Oahu*, *Ramanaganga* and *Pas'akas*. In Warsaw the so-called *Second Exhibition of Modern Art* took place at the Zachęta Gallery. According to Mieczysław Porębski, the show revealed a visible mobilization in non-objective art.<sup>6</sup> The exhibition includes many examples of tachism, abstraction and other Modernist approaches. Moreover, it was by no means a small, private undertaking, hidden from the sight of the authorities. On the contrary, party dignitaries participated in the opening ceremony and the exhibition was widely reviewed in the national press. The same could be said about

Czechoslovakia, where Zdeněk Beran, Vladimir Boudník, Josef Istler and Antonín Tomálik produced their *Art informel* paintings. However, those works were not featured in major public exhibitions attended by party dignitaries, but in private shows, such as the two legendary stagings of the Czech ‘Confrontations’, which took place in 1960 in Prague and the third in 1961 in Bratislava, Slovakia. One must add that in Hungary, slowly recovering after the bloody uprising, Krisztián Frey and Endre Tót began in the mid-1960s to create paintings outside the domain of official culture that resemble *Art informel* to a certain degree.

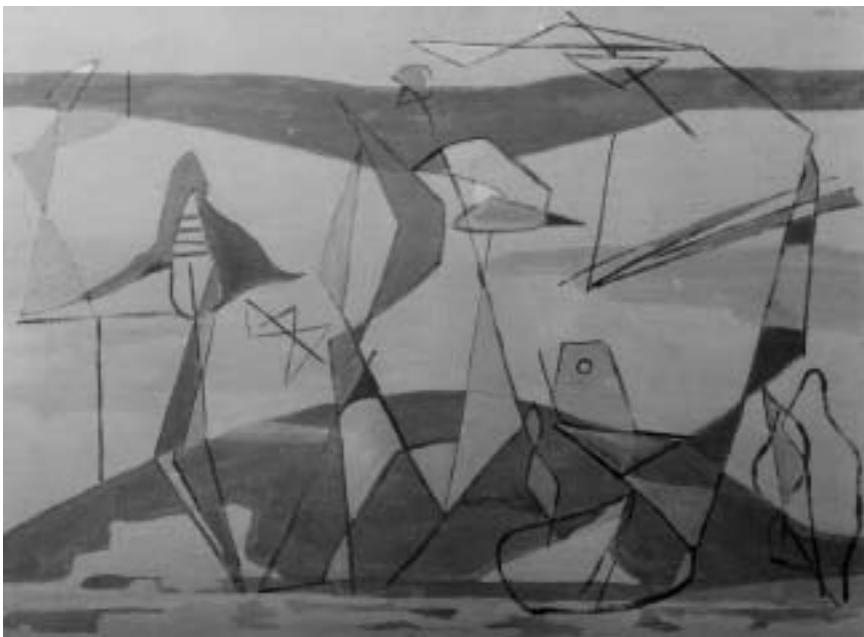
It is certain that the attitudes of the authorities affected the dynamic of the cultural ‘thaw’ and, conversely, that the dynamic of the ‘thaw’ forced the authorities to embrace particular positions. The 1958 Moscow exhibition of art from the twelve socialist countries provides a striking commentary on the attitudes of the different East European Communist regimes towards Modernism.<sup>7</sup> The exhibition included works from the Soviet Union, Albania, Bulgaria, China, Czechoslovakia, the GDR, Hungary, Korea, Mongolia, Poland, Romania and Vietnam. The Polish section was quite unique. It significantly



16. Tadeusz  
Kantor,  
*Akonkagua*,  
1957. National  
Museum,  
Poznań.

departed in character from the exhibitions presented by the other states within the 'people's democracy', a fact that likely accounts for its huge popularity among the viewing public, artists and officials. According to one visitor's report, that difference was a result of the Polish show's emphasis on Modernism, which contrasted sharply with the stylistic uniformity of the rest of the exhibition, which was dominated by Socialist Realism.

The exhibition revealed a very different attitude, one could even say a strategy, of the Polish authorities concerning modernity. The organizers of the Polish section assumed that they should show Modernist art in Moscow or, at the very least, they concluded that they should not show Socialist Realism, like the other delegations. This decision in and of itself was significant irrespective of what it was that the Polish authorities had actually selected for Moscow. On closer inspection, it becomes clear that Modernist works did not in fact dominate the Polish show. The selection featured mainly post-Impressionist and more expressive, or just more metaphorically veiled, forms of realism. Abstract art (for instance, the work of Adam Marczyński), which was seen as 'radical Modernism', appeared only on the margins. Still, it is significant for the present discussion that it was precisely the work of Marczyński (illus. 17) that generated the greatest interest in Moscow. One of the participants of the exhibition remembered that, '[t]he attendance in the Polish section was so high, that on the second day of the exhibition our Soviet assistant asked our



17. Adam  
Marczyński,  
*On the Water*,  
1956. National  
Museum,  
Poznań.

permission to install protective barriers in front of some exhibits, for example the paintings of Adam Marczyński'.<sup>8</sup> However, seen against the uniform background of Socialist Realism, the entire collection of the more or less 'advanced' modern styles (post-Impressionism, Expressionism and abstraction) was interpreted by the Moscow and international audience as Modernism. What is perhaps even more interesting is the fact that the exhibition was organized at the moment when the Polish authorities were already becoming less tolerant of the violently erupting interest in Modernism among Polish artists and critics, which characterized the period 1956 to 1957, and were beginning to insist on a return to realism.<sup>9</sup> Soon afterwards, the Polish Communist Party would issue a rather amusing directive permitting no more than 'fifteen per cent of abstraction' in any exhibition of visual arts. Naturally the rule was unenforceable. It did function, however, as a warning of the regime's growing disapproval of the widespread interest in abstract art and as a gesture towards the hard-liners. Nonetheless, it had no significant impact on the Polish art scene.

The Moscow exhibition demonstrated quite clearly that the Polish regime was not willing to give up the 'scrap of independence' in its conduct of international affairs (including cultural ones) that Gomułka negotiated with Khrushchev in the wake of the events of October 1956. The character of Gomułka's ambitions can be perhaps best illustrated with an anecdote related by Stefan Kisielewski:

When the delegation of the Romanian Central Committee visited Poland, someone came up with an idea to take them to see an exhibition of paintings at the National Museum [in Warsaw]. As it turned out, the current show featured contemporary Polish art and consisted mainly of abstractions. The Romanians were furious when they saw it; they stormed out and went to see Starewicz, who was then in charge of culture, to ask him what was going on, such formalism in a socialist country, such Western influences?! Starewicz went to see Gomułka, who told him: 'I don't know anything about abstract painting, and I will certainly have a talk with the director [of the National Museum in Warsaw] Lorentz, but the Romanian comrades will not be deciding what kinds of exhibitions we should have.'<sup>10</sup>

Of course, one could ask whether the Polish organizers of the Moscow exhibition had a choice, whether they could actually show Socialist Realism like the other delegations, or whether the return to Socialist Realism was impossible in Poland by the second half of the 1950s. In Poland, the political and cultural processes put in motion after Stalin's death were already so advanced that they were virtually unstoppable. Moreover, a significant segment

of the party apparatus was interested in maintaining those changes, not so much out of goodwill, but out of sheer pragmatism. Those supporters of reforms understood that more or less visible surveillance was simply much more effective as an instrument of power than crude punishment and terror. What was at issue, however, was not the actual range of options available to the Communist authorities, but their choice of strategy. The decision of the Polish regime to embrace Modernist art in its efforts to define its political identity on the international arena (especially important in the case of the Moscow exhibition, which involved other Communist states generally hostile to Modernism) and particularly in Moscow, the nerve centre of Communism, was indeed unique in Eastern Europe and as such quite significant. It was unique because in no other country within the Soviet sphere of influence was Modernist art – and in particular *Art informel* painting – part of the official artistic culture. It was significant because it defined a particular paradigm within which modern art would function in the future. However, one must keep in mind that even though modern art, including *Art informel*, developed in Poland within the sphere of official art, it was never considered *official art* in the literal sense of the term.

Analogous artistic tendencies were developing simultaneously, though outside the official channels, in Czechoslovakia. The cultural ‘thaw’, in stark contrast to the political ‘thaw’, took place here at approximately the same time as in Poland.<sup>11</sup> At the beginning of 1955, the Czechoslovak Association of Artists organized the so-called *Exhibition of the Eleven* in Prague. The show was by no means revolutionary. Nevertheless, it was significant because it represented a clear rejection of the strict confines of Socialist Realism and a move in the direction of Modernism through Expressionism and Fauvism, but above all, reference to Matisse’s work.<sup>12</sup> The same year two other important exhibitions took place in Poland: the *Armoury (Arsenał)*, organized as part of the international youth festival taking place under the slogan ‘Against War, Against Fascism’, and an intimate show called the *Exhibition of the Nine* (due to the number of the participants), which took place in Kraków. While the *Armoury* show predominantly featured works by younger artists searching for more convincing means of expression than those offered by the Socialist Realist canon, and who were generally drawn to a vaguely defined tradition of Expressionism, the *Exhibition of the Nine* included works by more mature and experienced painters. Although none of the shows taking place in 1955 showed *Art informel* paintings, they all prepared the ground for the expansion of the artistic ‘thaw’, which gained significant momentum the following year. In 1956, after returning home from a fellowship in Paris, Tadeusz Kantor showed his first *Art informel* canvases in Poland. The following year, he would complete a

series of *Art informel* works *par excellence*. In Czechoslovakia the fully developed scene of gestural painting would emerge in 1958–9. However, it was nurtured by a different, local tradition of Czech Surrealism and would by the 1960s encompass a much larger group of artists who would intensely explore this form of pictorial expression.<sup>13</sup>

The issue of tradition is crucial to understanding the function of modern art in Eastern Europe, both during the interwar period and in the 1940s, before the Communist regimes began imposing new cultural policies aimed at the institutionalization of Socialist Realism. The shift from the old to a new system was particularly abrupt and brutal in Czechoslovakia. Unlike in Poland or Hungary, where the changes manifested themselves in the entrenchment and reinforcement of the existing methods of political control, in Czechoslovakia they consisted of a thorough transformation of the entire political system. The 1948 coup, which brought the Communist regime to power, abolished the multi-party system in favour of the dictatorship of the Communist Party. If we adopt the view espoused by Czech art historians that the local tradition of Surrealism functioned as the main reference for Czech *Art informel*, then we must conclude that Czech artists were indeed working in a unique situation.

In Czechoslovakia, Surrealism provided a key historic point of reference for the history of Czech art in the twentieth century. Moreover, Czech Surrealism had an original character and could not be dismissed as a mere reproduction of the French model. Of course, this does not mean that it developed and functioned in isolation, but rather that the Czech art world manifested considerable idiosyncrasy and independence.<sup>14</sup> In Poland, as Kantor observed, ‘there was no Surrealism, because Poland was ruled by Catholicism’.<sup>15</sup> And yet, even here, one could find references to the Surrealist tradition, which were discussed in the previous chapter. Even though one cannot compare the position of Surrealism in Poland or in any other East European country to that which it occupied in Czechoslovakia, the tradition of the 1940s nevertheless played a significant role in Poland in creating a climate favourable to a positive reception of *Art informel* in the 1950s. The *First Exhibition of Modern Art*, held in Kraków in 1948, functioned in this context as an enormously significant reference for the Polish ‘thaw’ Modernism. At the same time, it did not provide a direct inspiration for the development of Polish *Art informel*, which, instead, should be traced to Kantor’s trip to France. One could say that Kantor brought *Art informel* to Poland in his suitcase, whereas Czech artists, though they also travelled abroad, developed it by transforming their own, local Surrealist tradition.<sup>16</sup>

The situation in Hungary was different still. Due to the political circumstances, there were no discussions of *Art informel* in that country in

the second half of the 1950s. And yet in the 1940s, when Hungary already functioned under a different set of political directives, the dominant position within the local art world was occupied by the eclectic coterie of the European School, which mixed the classical tradition of French Modernism with models provided by abstract art as well as the loosely conceived influence of Surrealism.<sup>17</sup> However, that earlier tradition would not have any impact on the much later development of the very unique form of Hungarian *Art informel*.

For those reasons, the discussion of the reception of *Art informel* in Eastern Europe must be limited to Czechoslovakia and Poland. It must also take into consideration one more factor, namely, the widespread interest in existentialist philosophy in both countries. The popularity of existentialism, with its emphasis on the individual, subjectivity, inner experience and the problem of freedom considered from an individual rather than collective perspective, was clearly a reaction against the institutionalization of Marxism in Eastern Europe. It offered a polemic response to the main concepts and, above all, the values of the official philosophy: materialism and collectivism. In Poland as well as Czechoslovakia, the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, to mention only the best-known authors, were becoming more and more popular throughout the 1950s. The negative reaction of the party 'philosophers' to existentialism, invoked with increasing frequency in Polish literary and philosophical discussions, made it even more attractive to the Polish intellectuals opposed to the regime. Because *Art informel* was connected in many ways with existentialism in the West and particularly in France, which was of great interest to the whole of Eastern Europe, interest in that philosophy created a climate favourable to the development of interest in the painting of gesture (and vice versa). In such a context, *Art informel* could be seen as a defence of individualism against the state-imposed collectivism.

Before considering the reception of *Art informel* in Eastern Europe in greater detail, I would like to make a few observations regarding terminology. The concept of *Art informel* has never been precisely defined in current East European critical and art-historic discourses or in those of the late 1950s. Interestingly, this could also be said with respect to French historiography. In the countries considered within this study, the term *Art informel* has been used to designate a very broadly understood set of qualities belonging to non-objective and non-geometric painting. As a result, it has frequently been used interchangeably with the terms 'painting of gesture', tachism, *art autre*, lyrical abstraction, abstract Expressionism and *art brut*, as well as 'matter painting' (*la peinture de matière*), also referred to as 'structural abstraction'. The differences in the meaning of the individual terms are either minute or altogether

absent, with the exception of the last term, coined in the context of experiments with the physical materials of painting.

I will begin my account of the reception of *Art informel* in Eastern Europe with Poland. Although the 1955 *Armory* show certainly played a significant role in the process of rejection of Socialist Realism, its impact on the adoption and reactivation of the notion of modernity in Polish artistic culture was negligible. A statement made by Piotr Krakowski, an art critic closely affiliated with the Krakow Modernist circles and cited by Elżbieta Grabska, one of the organizers of the *Armoury* show, is rather telling in this respect:

He arrived and I showed him around the Armoury. Looking at me with wide open eyes, he said: 'What is this? I feel as if I were in Germany in the late twenties or early thirties, or perhaps back in Warsaw during that time. What kind of painting is this? Do you really think here this is modern art?' Those were the words of a man from Kraków who saw every day [works by] . . . [Maria] Jarema, [Jonasz] Stern, Kantor, and all the others who did not participate in 'the soc'.

His point of reference was not 'the soc', but 'the moderns', who right after 'October' were officially shown.<sup>18</sup> The moderns, namely Jarema, Kantor, Stern, Tadeusz Brzozowski, Jadwiga Maziarska, Kazimierz Mikulski, Jerzy Nowosielski, Erna Rosenstein and Jerzy Skarżyński, were 'shown' in the fall of 1955 in the *Exhibition of the Nine*. This relatively small show, accompanied by a modest catalogue, had a tremendous impact on the Polish art scene. Although the exhibited works were for the most part steeped in the Modernist language of the late 1940s and made clear references to the *First Exhibition of Modern Art*, they also directed the viewers' attention to much more recent developments, in a marked contrast to the *Armoury* show. The *Exhibition of the Nine* made possible the revival in 1957 of the Kraków Group, or rather the emergence of the so-called Second Kraków Group and the establishment of the Krzysztofory Gallery under Kantor's leadership. The Exhibition also provided an impetus for the *Second Exhibition of Modern Art*, organized in 1957 by the Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw, the *Third Exhibition of Modern Art*, held in 1959, also at the Zachęta, and for the famous March Salons organized in Zakopane.

Of course, this does not mean that Modernist tendencies in Polish art were confined to Kraków during the 'thaw'. In Warsaw, the Warped Wheel (*Krzywe Koło*) Gallery, founded as an annex to the Warped Wheel Club, the famed 'revisionist' discussion club, by the members of the Group 55, became one of the most important 'thaw' venues.<sup>19</sup> The Gallery, run by Marian Bogusz, provided exhibition opportunities for other Polish artists' groups active in the mid-1950s: St-53 from Katowice, and two Poznań collectives, 4F+R, founded in

1947 and reactivated in the mid-1950s, and R-55. It also showed works by Jerzy Kujawski that were the ‘purest’ and most direct examples of *Art informel* in Poland, largely due to the fact that the artist resided permanently in Paris. As we shall see, the gallery also provided a forum for encounters among artists from different East European countries.

The Polish artistic ‘thaw’ reached a climax of sorts in 1957. In addition to the *Second Exhibition of Modern Art*, which took place in Warsaw, and the reactivation of the Kraków Group, which became one of the most influential artistic collectives of the period, the year brought a new editorial board to the *Przegląd Artystyczny* (Art Review), a journal that provided one of the most significant forums for Polish art criticism and that was to function as a platform for the development of the new discourse, largely sympathetic to *Art informel*. Although the *Przegląd Artystyczny* was by no means the only journal dealing with the problematic of modern art, it was, next to *Projekt* (Project), founded in 1956, *Plastyka* (Fine Arts) and *Struktury* (Structures), both founded a short time later, the most important proponent of analytic art criticism formulated from a Modernist, not to say ‘formalist’, perspective.

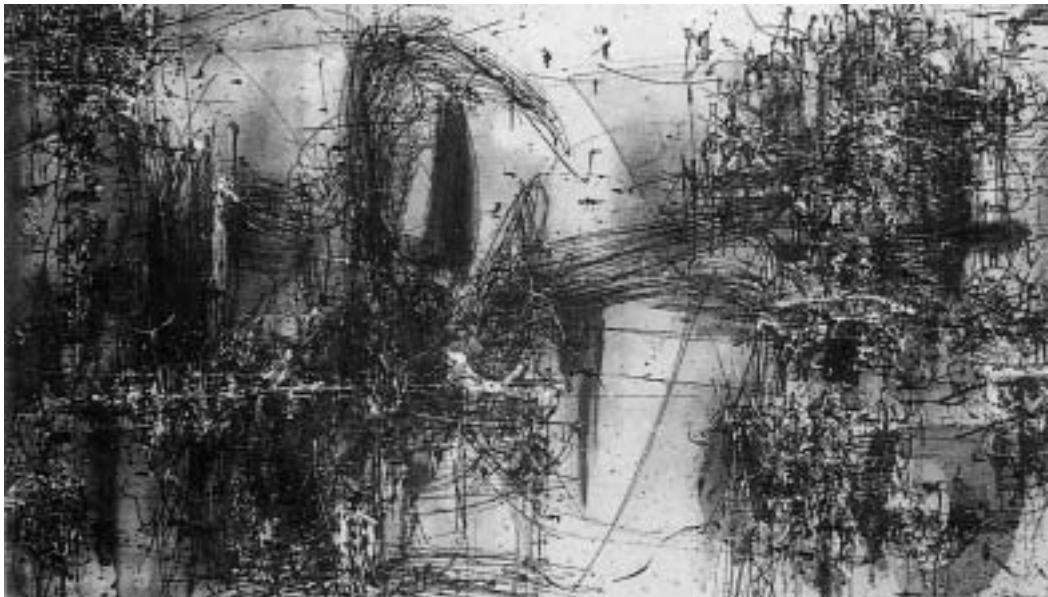
Also in 1957, Kantor, the leader of the Kraków Group and one of the main protagonists of the Polish artistic ‘thaw’, published an essay intended as a polemic response to the critics of the *Second Exhibition of Modern Art*, entitled ‘Abstraction is Dead – Long Live Abstraction’, which would function as a kind of manifesto of the Polish *Art informel*. Kantor wrote that modern (abstract geometric) art was born out a need to contain the world within a rational order. Reason was back then the main instrument of understanding the world. The art created within its optical regime was subjected to a rigorous rational discipline. That was the situation in the beginning, during the period of the classic avant-garde, when the art language was fundamentally refashioned. Kantor mentioned at this point, as an example, the work of Piet Mondrian. He observed that now, after the experience of several decades of the twentieth century, we know that the intellect is not the only instrument of knowledge. He claimed that there are many forces in the contemporary world that defy rational understanding: the absurd forces of chaos, the elements, rebellion, negation, irrationality and so on. We cannot describe that world using the language of reason. We must use other means, in particular imagination, instinct, and emotion. The Polish artist mentioned Dada and Surrealism as examples of art that rejected rational description of the world in favour of imaginative and irrational approaches, but which did not sacrifice the project of understanding. On the contrary, this art had revealed many hidden dimensions of reality. Dada and Surrealism, wrote Kantor, gave birth to ‘automatism’ and ‘chance’ as methods of creation and means to understanding. He argued that matter is a

power that lacks structure (*konstrukcja*) but has mass and density (*konsystencja*). Chance, when used as an artistic method, structures the latter. It is therefore much more appropriate as a tool for shaping the work than the geometry used by the masters of the early avant-garde. Tachism or *Art informel* (which Kantor believed was a better term) mocked the desire to apprehend matter through rational means. In his conclusion, he wrote:

Art is one of the means of comprehension of life. Abstract art based on geometry, which has already produced thousands of works, is today an equivalent of scholastic life. Closed off within the discipline of construction, limited, controlling its own beginning and end, calculated and rigid, it has created a perception of life pedantically lined up as a sequence of causes and effects. The understanding of life today is much more complex. Today's art, just like life, participates in meanings we never quite fully comprehend. We observe its movement and we can control it rationally to a limited extent. Contemporary art does not attempt to represent or reproduce or inscribe that movement and action, but to become its effect. This has nothing to do with imitation, either of an object or of an imagined reality. The painting becomes an instance of creation and a manifestation of life, its extension. This is a completely new conception of the work of art and a new aesthetic.<sup>20</sup>



18. Tadeusz  
Kantor,  
*Amarapura*,  
1957. National  
Museum,  
Poznań.

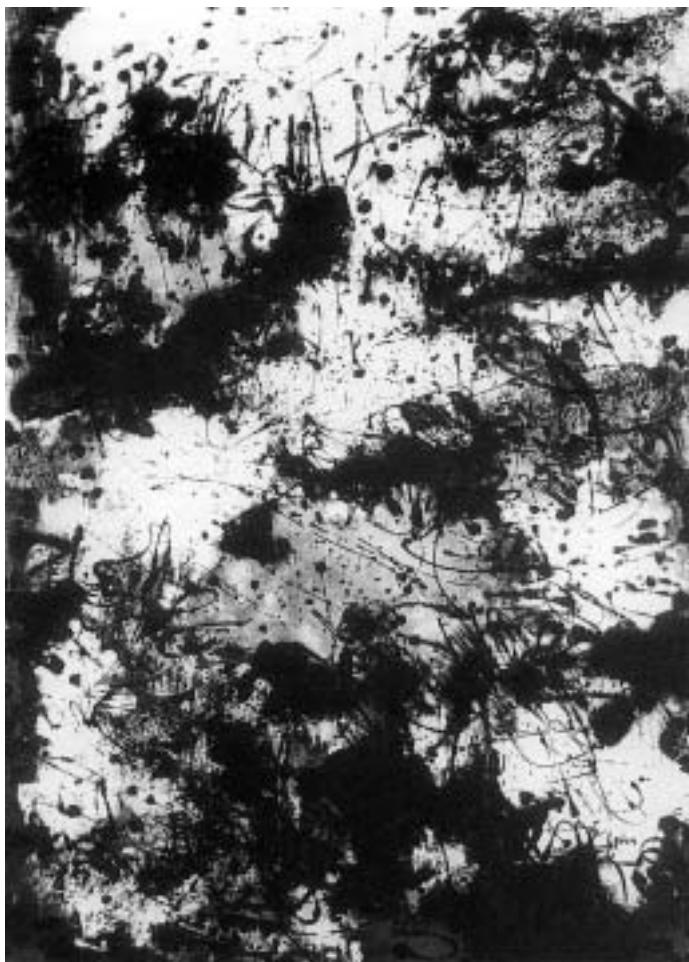


In 1957 Kantor also painted his most characteristic *Art informel* works: *Amarapura* (illus. 18), *Akonkagua, Oahu, Pacific, Pas'aks* and *Ramanaganga*. They were all executed in a similar manner, using violent brushwork and vigorous 'splashing' of paint directly onto the canvas. The dynamic of the forms shaped by chance, created without preconceived compositional structure, went hand in hand with the textural surface tensions. It was no longer colour, but paint, which reflected violent gestures of the artist, that informed the visual and emotional character of the work. Of course, Kantor was not the only Polish artist working in the 'classic' *Art informel* mode. The others included Jerzy Kujawski (illus. 19), Alfred Lenica (illus. 20), Zdzisław Salaburski, and Teresa Tyszkiewicz (illus. 21). However, it would be difficult to describe this gathering of artists as, to borrow Porębski's term, a 'general mobilization' in the service of *Art informel*. It would be more accurate to use such a metaphor to describe a general attitude towards all types of modern art, for which abstraction remained an important reference point. Polish art of the period remained dominated by an intermediate approach, consisting of abstraction that still invoked figurative associations. Tadeusz Brzozowski and Tadeusz Dominik, painters with quite different backgrounds and experiences, are good examples of individuals who successfully negotiated between these traditions.

Still, the task at hand does not consist of compiling an exhaustive list of Polish *Art informel* painters and those who, in some way, explored the tendency. As I have noted earlier, the term *Art informel* never had the requisite semantic

19. Jerzy Kujawski, *Space Landscape*, 1957. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

20 Alfred  
Lenica, *Stains  
on the Sky and  
the Earth*, 1957.  
Muzeum Sztuki,  
Łódź.



clarity in Eastern Europe. It is much more productive to inquire into the character and development of this type of art. Upon closer investigation, it becomes apparent that its characteristic process consisted, to quote Porębski, of 'an experience of matter, rather than gesture'.<sup>21</sup> The emphasis of Polish *Art informel* on aesthetic values was closer to the sensibility of *la peinture de matière* than to the philosophical values of classic, especially French, painting of gesture, not to mention the political overtones of the work of the COBRA group. This aestheticization of *Art informel* in Poland through emphasis on the 'material' of the canvas was quite symptomatic and would be historically significant.

It should be noted that Slovak and Czech art historians have reached similar conclusions regarding Czech and Slovak *Art informel*.<sup>22</sup> They have also

observed the aesthetization of *Art informel*, manifested in the importance of composition, stress on formal perfection and finish, attention to colour harmony and so on. What appears particularly interesting, and is most likely an effect of the local, East European tradition, is that even the so-called structural 'matter painting', which involved thick application of *impasto* or the addition of untraditional materials, was interpreted in terms of spiritual function rather than as being primarily physical and material in character. Czech artists such as Jiří Valenta relied on a classic formulation of matter painting, informed by the neo-Thomist perspective of Jacques Maritain.<sup>23</sup> In a seeming paradox, for them, the emphasis on matter had spiritual significance. This attachment to the spiritual, or, one could say, its aestheticization, retained in even the most radical experiments with material, should be seen without a doubt as an effort to defend culture perceived as a sublimation of spirituality. This attitude stands in sharp contrast to the Western contestation of such understanding of culture exemplified by the art of Dubuffet, COBRA or the



21. Teresa  
Tyszkiewicz,  
*Born Forms*,  
1957. National  
Museum,  
Warsaw.

German group SPUR. Those attitudes of the Western artists could not be comprehended by East European painters living under the permanent pressure of ‘cultural policies’, whose sole, sometimes explicitly stated purpose was instrumentalization of culture, or its *de facto* elimination (insofar as culture represents an arena of unencumbered individual expression). While Western artists saw culture as a tool of the bourgeois value system, their East European counterparts embraced it as a form of resistance against the regime. Consequently, because the concept of *bourgeoisie* had a great deal of ambiguity in Soviet-occupied Europe, resistance against bourgeois understanding of culture expressed through art was also received with a great deal of ambivalence.

It is possible that the preference for matter painting over painting of gesture had a regional character. Perhaps it should be linked to a certain delay in the reception of *Art informel* in this geographic region or, more precisely, to the fact that East European artists encountered this tendency later, in its more aesthetized – one could even say, institutionalized – phase, when the material itself and its formal rather than existential experience played a much greater role. It is, however, possible that there were also not so obvious historic reasons for the aesthetization of this fundamentally subversive art form. East European artists, who experienced systematic and premeditated degradation, politicization and propagandistic instrumentalization of culture by the Communist authorities at first hand, were simply more interested in the defence rather than the contestation of culture.

Returning to the situation in Poland, it would be easy to continue listing names of artists interested more in experimenting with material than with gestural painting technique. In the Krakow Group, one should mention in this context Jadwiga Maziarska, whose works incorporated gravel, stones, plaster and later wax and were explicitly described as ‘art of matter’. Some of her works, for instance *Blemishes of Unwritten Poems* (illus. 22), were executed as early as 1954. Other artists who adopted a similar approach were Aleksander Kobzdej, Zbigniew Tymoszewski, Rajmund Ziemski and Jan Lebenstein (illus 23). It is worth mentioning that in 1959 Lebenstein won the Grand Prix de la Ville de Paris at the Paris Biennale, marking the climax of international interest in Polish Modernist art of the late 1950s. That interest, which extended beyond the sphere of art, could be seen beyond Europe. Eva Cockcroft, who has written extensively about the employment of culture as an instrument of Cold War politics, observed with regards to American efforts:

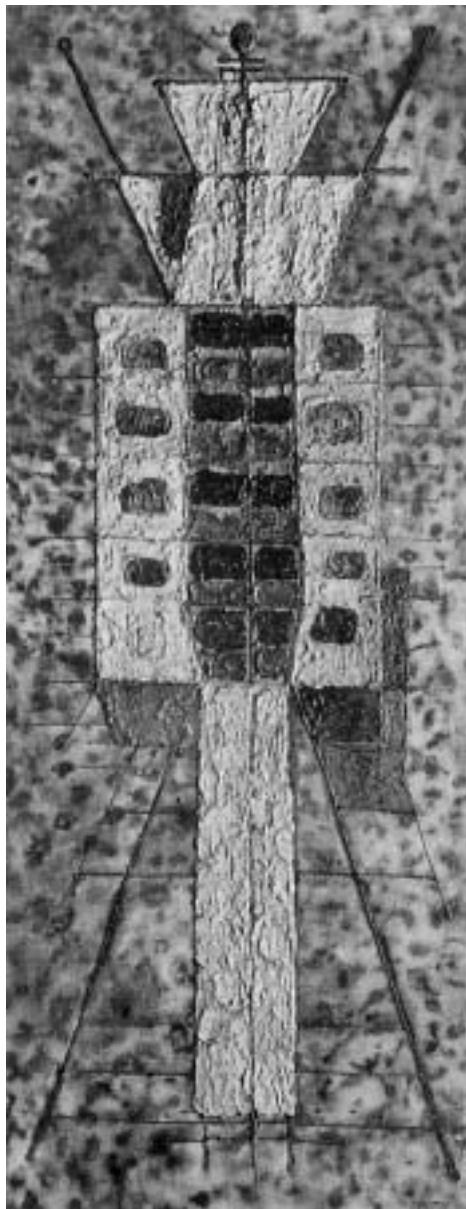
Especially important was the attempt to influence intellectuals and artists behind the ‘iron curtain’. During the post-Stalin era in 1956, when the Polish government under Gomulka became more liberal, Tadeusz Kantor, an artist from Cracow, impressed by work of Pollock and other abstract-

tionists which he had seen during an earlier trip to Paris, began to lead the movement away from socialist realism in Poland. Irrespective of the role of this art movement within the internal artistic evolution of Polish art, this kind of development was seen as a triumph for ‘our side’. In 1961, Kantor and 14 other nonobjective Polish painters were given an exhibition at MOMA. Examples like this one reflect the success of the political aims of the international programs of MOMA.<sup>24</sup>

Regardless of the issue as to what extent Kantor’s painting should be interpreted in terms of a success of the Cold War strategy of the US State Department, or in terms of the local artistic and historic processes as well as the impact of the French (rather than American) art scene, it is certain that Cold War politics underpinned the Western interest in the Eastern European ‘thaw’. Lebenstein’s Paris Grand Prix must be seen in those terms. Moreover, the decision to hold the annual congress of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) in Warsaw in 1960 (Poland joined the organization a bit later) also had political character. Ironically the congress took place at the moment when the Polish authorities were already attempting to slow down the momentum of the ‘thaw’. This was also the time when the last two ‘thaw’ issues of the *Przegląd Artystyczny* were published. Later, under a different editorial leadership, the journal would lose its Modernist character. The authorities were



22. Jadwiga Maziarska,  
*Blemishes of Unwritten Poems*, 1954.  
Muzeum Okręgowe, Bydgoszcz.



23. Jan  
Lebenstein,  
*Figure on the  
Diagonals*,  
1958. National  
Museum,  
Poznań.

also closing the other 'thaw' art journals. *Plastyka* was discontinued in 1959 and a year later the authorities closed *Struktury*. On the occasion of the AICA Congress, the Warped Wheel Gallery organized an exhibition, *Confrontations '60*, which provided an overview of the most recent Polish art. Incidentally, the Gallery stayed open until 1965, when it was finally closed by the authorities.

The Warped Wheel Club, without a doubt the most interesting centre of the Polish intellectual ‘thaw’, closed three years earlier, in 1962.

Although the Communist Party began to make efforts to regain control over the cultural arena in the early 1960s introducing a series of new restrictions, it was not interested in returning to the pre-‘thaw’ atmosphere of the early 1950s. It is quite likely that such a return would have been still possible, but, despite the occasional aggressive rhetoric of the party officials, it was no longer desirable. The authorities decreed fifteen per cent of artistic freedom; society interpreted that decree as a wink and a nod, a kind of game. That game was played till the end, that is until the rise of an independent underground art scene in the early 1980s, largely left alone even under the period of martial law (1981–3). After ‘the October’ of 1956, Polish artists lived, to borrow Miklós Haraszti’s metaphor, in ‘a velvet prison’,<sup>25</sup> enjoying much greater freedom than the prescribed fifteen per cent. But they did live in a cell, and the freedom they were allowed to enjoy was externally decreed.

At the time when the Polish regime was attempting to introduce much more restrictive cultural policies, the Czechoslovak authorities began to liberalize the political system. This rather dynamic process began in the early 1960s with a political rather than legal review of the Stalinist sentences and purges as well as a certain revision of history consisting of the rehabilitation of the Slovak national uprising, among others. It ended in a dramatic crisis in 1968 when the troops of the ‘friendly socialist states’ brutally suppressed the episode of Czech liberalization. There is a symptomatic coincidence of dates in the similarly titled exhibitions that took place in Poland and Czechoslovakia during those years. For instance, in 1960 both countries hosted *Confrontations*. While the Warsaw *Confrontations*, which coincided with the world congress of AICA, closed the period of the Polish ‘thaw’, the Czech *Confrontations* marked the beginning of a period of artistic liberalization. As I mentioned earlier, the first Czech *Confrontations* took place in 1960 in the Prague studio of Jiří Valenta; the second were organized in the same year in the Czech studio of Aleš Veseléý. Although the first two exhibitions had a semi-private character, the third *Confrontation*, held in 1964, was a major public event.

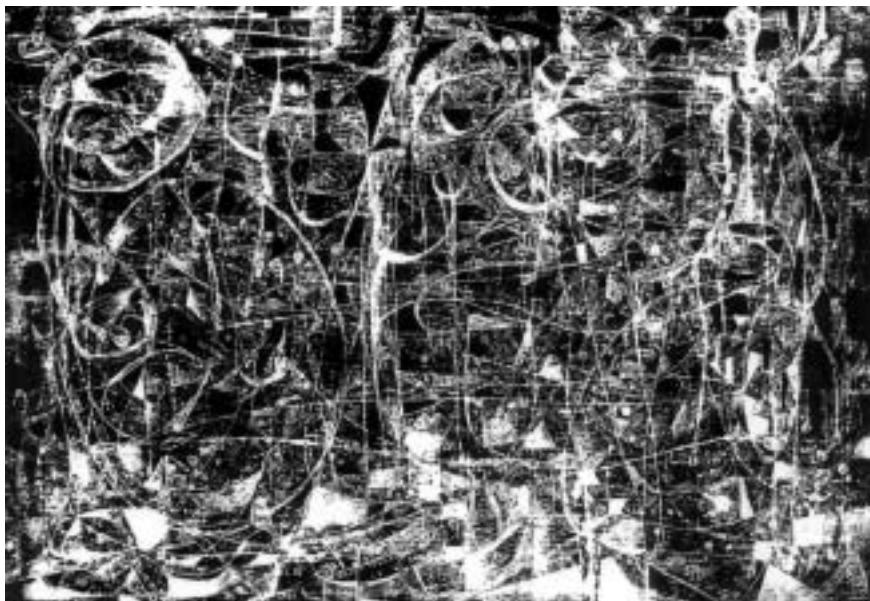
It is important to keep in mind that the Polish and Czech artists were not entirely isolated from one another. They met for the first time during a joint exhibition titled *Arguments*, organized by the Warped Wheel Gallery in 1962 in Warsaw. At the time, such initiatives were still out of the question in Czechoslovakia. In a sense, the show functioned as a ‘summit meeting’ of the artists of the Modernist ‘thaw’ from both countries. It must be emphasized that this summit did not take place under the auspices of the official cultural institutions, but was organized on the initiative of artists and art critics.<sup>26</sup>

Incidentally, Polish-Czech *Arguments* began a series of international shows featuring East European artists that were organized (mainly in Poland) outside official channels and that operated outside the boundaries defined by the official cultural policies. At times such events had a dissident character. For instance, František Šmejkal illegally smuggled his paintings to Warsaw for the *Arguments*.<sup>27</sup> In 1963 the same gallery organized a similar, but somewhat smaller, show of artists associated with the Slovak contingent of the Czechoslovak *Confrontations* (Eduard Ovčáček and Miloš Urbásek).<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately such contacts, which the authorities monitored with mistrust, even though – at least in Poland – they did not oppose them, were never as well developed as they should have been had the history of the East European countries taken a normal course under the conditions of democracy. Still, they were very important, not least because they stimulated various discussions. For instance, the Warsaw *Arguments* provided an opportunity for František Šmejkal to define the specific character of the Czech *Art informel*.<sup>29</sup> The *Arguments* also demonstrate that Poland functioned at the time as a gate to modernity, and hence to the West. It was much easier for the Czech artists to access Polish art journals such as the *Przegląd Artystyczny*, not only because of the similarities between Polish and Czech, but also because Polish publications (as those produced by an allied socialist country) were readily available through Czech libraries. As such, they constituted a key source of information. Mutual visits also provided excellent opportunities for expansion of knowledge and exchange of experiences.<sup>30</sup>

The 1960 Prague *Confrontations* and those organized a year later in Bratislava functioned as catalysts in the gradual process of ‘re-modernization’ of Czechoslovak artistic culture, whose Modernist tradition was brutally interrupted in 1948. The 1957 exhibition of the classic Czech modern art organized in Brno had a similar function (even though it focused on a remote past) due to the general hostility of the authorities towards Modernist heritage. Also in 1957, the art groups Maj'57, Trasa, and UB 12 were founded, and local journals interested in Modernist culture (*Výtvarné Práce*, *Květen*, *Výtvarné Umění*) began publishing more and more texts about modern art. The same year Jan Kotik, Libor Fára and Robert Piesen had important solo exhibitions. A year later, in 1958, in conjunction with the Brussels Expo, where the Czech exhibition attracted a great deal of attention, a number of artists were allowed for the first time to travel abroad and hence to encounter Western contemporary art in person. The *Confrontations* themselves were preceded by Jan Koblasa’s show, which took place on 5 June 1959 despite an official ban in the artist’s Prague studio and which gave impetus to criticism of the so-called ‘false’, academic Modernism.<sup>31</sup> The *Confrontations*, which revealed the existence of a Czech

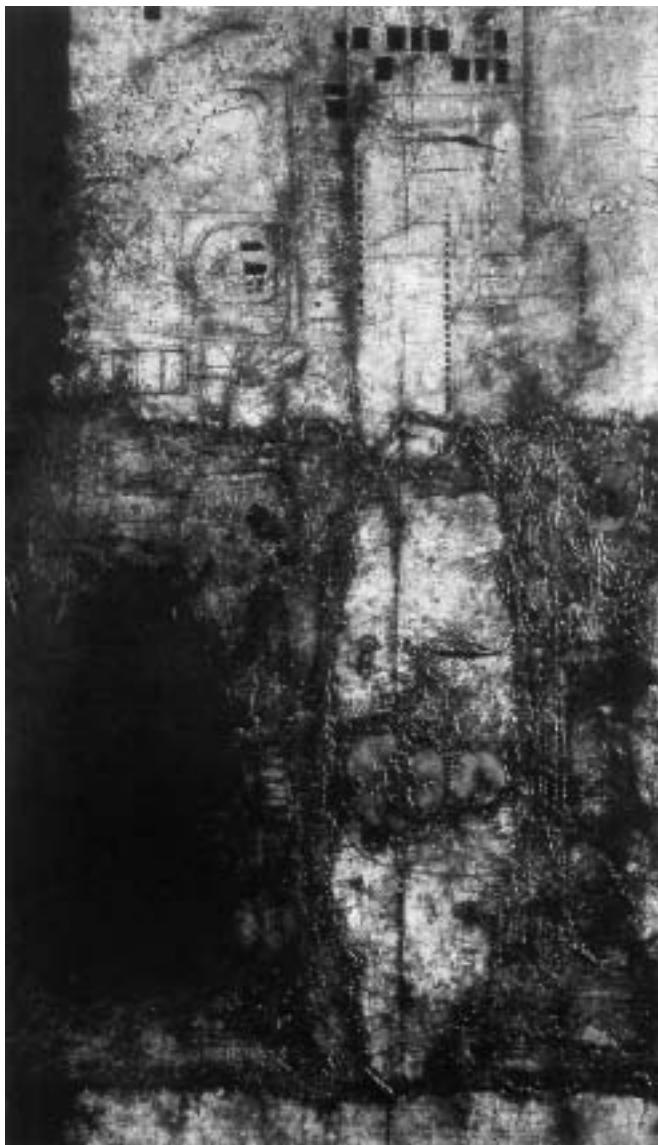
modern art that rejected classic Modernism, were a direct outgrowth of this type of criticism. At the same time, Czech *Art informel*, which was only one manifestation of the artistic ‘thaw’, or the ‘thaw’ Modernism, developed in the context of the local, Czech tradition of Surrealism.

Mahulena Nešlehova, a historian of the Czech *Art informel*, sees traces of the *art autre* (to use a term coined by Michel Tapié) in the 1930s paintings of Toyen, a key figure of Czech Surrealism.<sup>32</sup> In a subsequent study, she further develops this thesis, pointing to other Czech Surrealists, including one of the leading artists of the movement, Jindřich Štyrský. She also considers in great detail the artists of the 1940s, not only those living in Czechoslovakia, but also Alen Diviš, who lived permanently in New York.<sup>33</sup> Certainly, the tradition of Surrealism was alive and well in the post-war Czechoslovakia, in particular in Bohemia. It was nurtured through the war by the Ra group, which included Mikuláš Medek and Josef Istler, both of whom embraced the method of psychic automatism. While it would be difficult to see Medek’s highly original, metaphoric paintings imbued with references to the uncanny as a form of *Art informel*, Istler’s paintings from the late 1950s and early ’60s (for instance, *Painting III*; illus. 24) are some of the most classic examples of the tendency. Still, by the 1960s, Medek’s works also exhibited certain features of *Art informel*, such as the thick impasto typical of matter painting and the development of ‘drawn’ texture, rendered with short, abrupt brush strokes (*Sudden Arrival on the Yellow Border I*; illus. 25; and *Sensitive Manifestation II*;



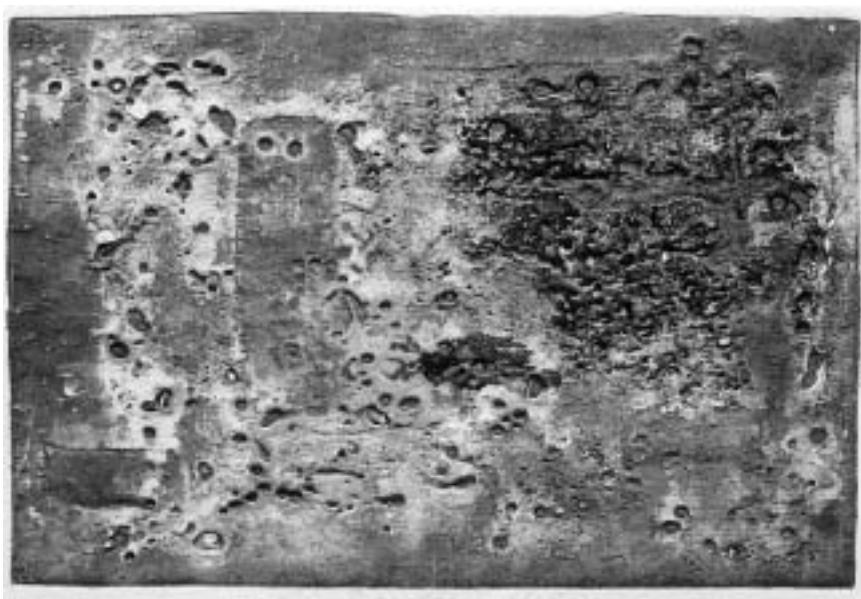
24. Josef Istler,  
*Painting III*,  
1958. Oblastní  
galerie, Liberec.

25. Mikuláš Medek, *Sudden Arrival on the Yellow Border I*, 1963. Oblastní galerie, Liberec.



illus. 26). Medek played a crucial role in the development of the Czech artistic environment, and in encouragement of freedom of expression and imagination. He and the writer Vratislav Effenberger became the key figures of Czech Surrealism after the death of Karel Teige in 1951. Medek's atelier on Janáčkově nábřeží was in the 1950s the meeting place of painters who, though rooted in Surrealism, were moving in the direction of *art autre* and *Art informel*: Josef Istler, Jan Kotik, Zbynek Sekal and, after 1958, Jan Koblasa.<sup>34</sup>

26. Mikuláš  
Medek,  
*Sensitive Mani-  
festation II*,  
1963. National  
Gallery, Prague.

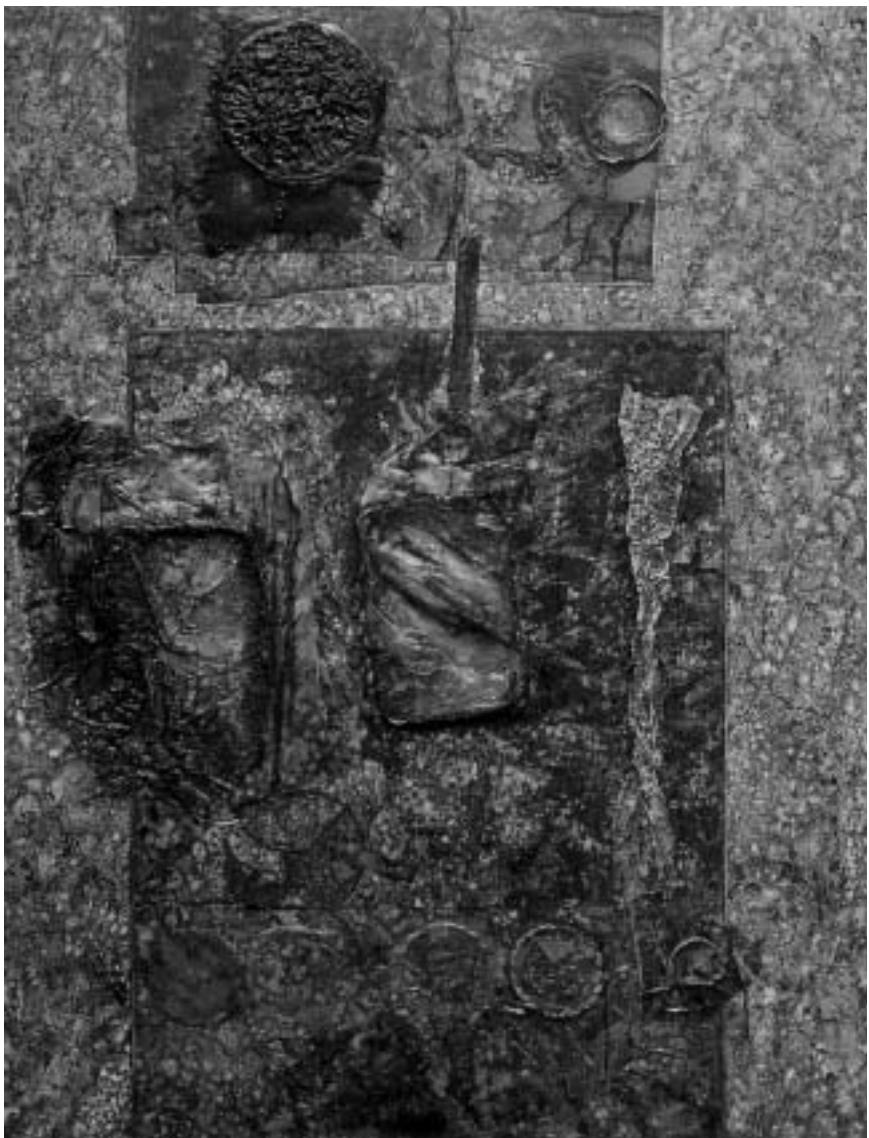


27. Vladimír  
Boudník,  
*Structural  
Print*, 1960.  
National  
Gallery, Prague.

Yet the artist who had the greatest impact on the development of Czech *Art informel* was Vladimir Boudník, whose manifestos of ‘explosionism’ from the late 1940s paved the way for both abstract art and ‘democratic’ art. Boudník, who was second only to Medek in his stature within the Czech art scene, claimed that anyone’s imagination could ‘explode’ and that anyone could find forms he or she desired in everyday reality. He put this theory into practice in his unique ‘street actions’. Together with the workers from the machine factory where he was employed and with passers-by he encountered on the streets of Prague, he created experiments aimed at marking contours of ‘forms’ on the walls of buildings. He would encourage his collaborators to find associations between ‘abstract’ patterns created on the surfaces of walls by dirt and missing plaster and the mental shapes suggested by their mind. His use of unconventional materials, such as sand, metal filings or organic substances (see his *Structural Print*; illus. 27), was probably closer to the idea of *art brut* of Jean Dubuffet or to the matter painting of Tapies and Burri than to classic painting of gesture.

Artists in Slovakia faced a somewhat different situation. They did not have access to a living local tradition of Surrealism. Moreover, the process of liberalization began in Bratislava later than in Prague and had more limited scope. Nevertheless, the emergence of so-called ‘lyrical abstraction’ was quite visible here as well. Among the leading artists of the Slovak *Art informel* were Eduard Ovčáček (illus. 28) and Miloš Urbásek, whose names have been already mentioned in conjunction with one of the Warsaw exhibitions and who, according to Katarína Bajcurová, owed a great deal to Boudník.<sup>35</sup> Others included, above all, Rudolf Fila (illus. 29), as well as Viera Kraicová and Dagmar Kočišová. The number of artists is not as important in this context as the unique local character of Slovak *Art informel*. Slovak art historians have claimed that, unlike other European artists, Slovak painters of *Art informel* never entirely eliminated figurative associations from their works.<sup>36</sup>

Returning, however, to Czech *Art informel*, the most unique and original (when considering its genesis) manifestation of the tendency in Eastern Europe: one could say that it was in Czechoslovakia that the development of *Art informel* was most complete, even though some have maintained that Czech conceptualization of *Art informel* painting was far more ‘moderate’ than ‘radical’.<sup>37</sup> That ‘moderation’ could not be attributed to the resistance of the latter-day Socialist Realists, whose influence was indeed much more powerful in Czechoslovakia than in Poland, or of the Post-Impressionists who, incidentally, were visibly active throughout Eastern Europe from the GDR to Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria and who everywhere opposed the newest artistic tendencies. Vojtěch Lahoda has argued that the ‘moderation’ of



28 Eduard Ovčáček, *Great Epitaph*, 1962. Štatna Galeria, Zlín.

the Czech *Art informel* was a result of the internally held belief in the ‘unsuitability’ of radicalism and of confidence in the ‘internal’ laws of Modernism. Those two views strongly favoured patient effort over the ‘skipping of subsequent developmental stages’ of art. If this interpretation is correct, then the Czech attitude represents a very interesting example of a unique form of dialectic materialism, which, after all, assumed the necessary and objective development of all social formations and which eliminate the possibility of any

'voluntary' or 'individual' agency in historical development. Paradoxically, therefore, we would be dealing here with the incorporation of a belief system associated with Socialist Realism, seen as the official expression of that philosophy, into art practice that developed as a form of resistance against Socialist Realism. As we can see, anything is possible in Eastern Europe and drawing clear-cut distinctions between certain historical standards does not necessarily make a great deal of sense.

Still, regardless of Lahoda's interpretation, one sees in Czechoslovakia an intensity, diversity and popularity of *Art informel* that are much greater than



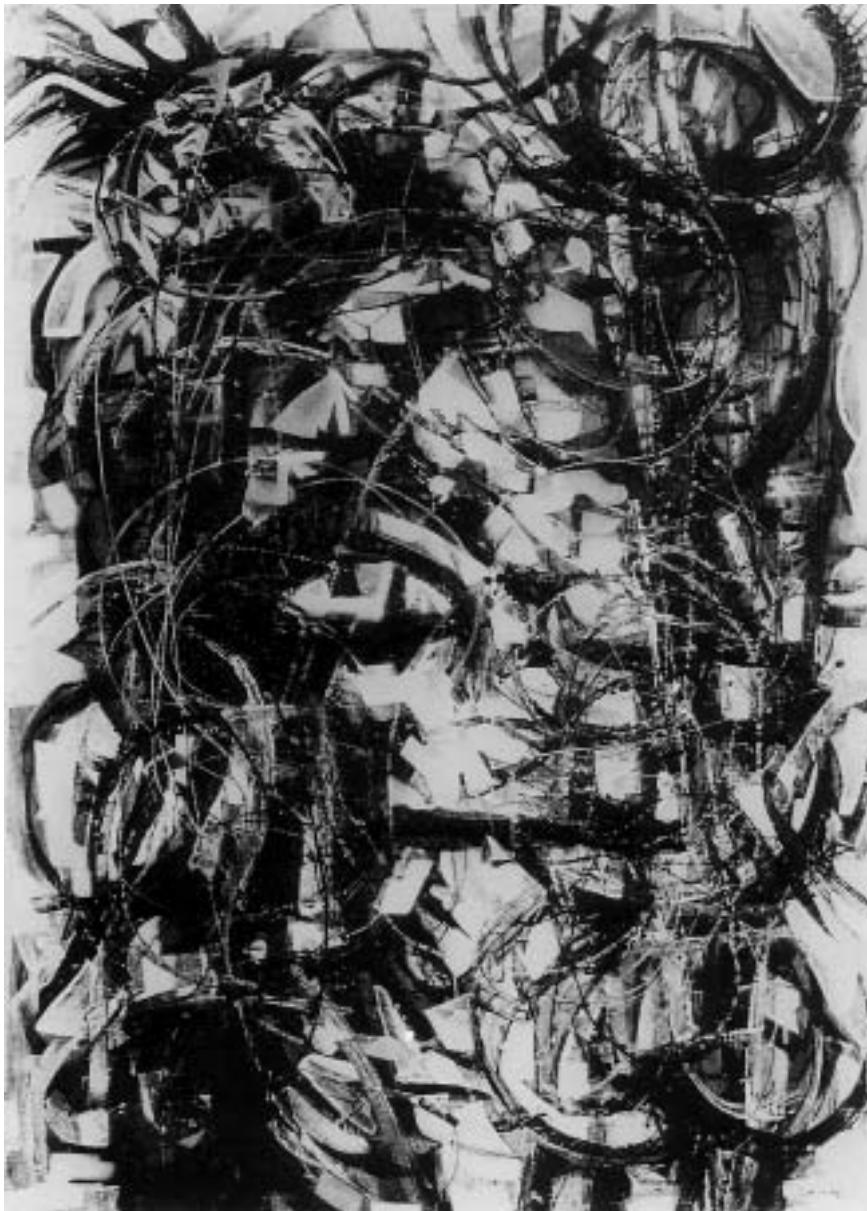
29. Rudolf Fila,  
*Black Accent*,  
1963. Slovak  
National  
Gallery.

30 Jiří Balcar,  
*Decree I*, 1961.  
Private  
collection.



anywhere else in the region. I am not referring to the artists working on the margins of the trend, who elsewhere (in Poland and Slovakia) routinely combined abstraction and figuration, but to the very core of *Art informel* and of abstract painting as such. On the one hand, one can find almost classic examples of the painting of gesture among such artists as Jiří Balcar (illus. 30), Istler (illus. 31), Kotik (illus. 32, 33), who travelled extensively and was familiar with Western *Art informel* in particular works of Asger Jorn, or Antonín Tomálik (illus. 34), who covered his canvases with resolute brushwork that called to mind movements made by the artist's body. Similar to classic

paintings of gesture produced ten years earlier in the West by Hans Hartung, Georges Mathieu and Wols, the works of those Czech artists materialized the painter's physical existence and functioned, to a certain extent, as an extension of his body.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, contrary to Lahoda's contention, one can also see in Czech *Art informel* examples of an extremely radical variant of matter



31. Josef Istler,  
*Painting*, 1959.  
Private  
collection.

32. Jan Kotik,  
*Antarctic*, 1960.  
Česke muzeum  
vytvárných  
umění, Prague.



33. Jan Kotik,  
*Composition II*,  
1960. National  
Gallery, Prague.



34. Antonín Tomalík,  
*Untitled*, 1959.  
Private collection.



painting, one that does not limit itself to the tensions inherent in paint or even paint 'enhanced' with 'non-artistic' materials. One should mention in this context the work of Zdeněk Beran (*Untitled 1*, 1958–9), Čestmir Janošek (*Untitled*, 1958–9), Jan Koblasa (*Finis terrae*, illus. 35), Pavel Nešleha and Jiří Valenta. There are also many examples of works created entirely using 'other' materials, such as those by Zbyšek Sion (illus. 36), and, above all, Aleš Veselý,

in which it is no longer matter but material – such as metal and wood – that declares the autonomy of the work, its uniqueness and artistic identity (illus. 37). All references to the artist's existence disappear; the result is an assemblage, a self-referential work that identifies itself with the materials from which it is constructed. However, in contrast to American assemblage, Czech artists did not incorporate objects from popular mass culture, but instead chose those that emphasized the autonomous status of the work of art. For instance, Aleš Veselý's painting-objects operated very much within the conventions of Modernism. Although they invoked 'other' technologies, they did not challenge the language of Modernism and did not constitute its critique. They operated within the domain of the aesthetic, not within a tension directed against it. Metal springs and peeling boards produce the aesthetic poetics of the painting-object. They intensified the classic visual experience of the painting of gesture or, to be precise, of the matter painting. In this instance, especially when one takes into account the fact that this work was being produced in the first half

35. Jan Koblasa,  
*Finis terrae*  
(part 5), 1961.  
National  
Gallery, Prague.



36. Zbyšek  
Sion, Yellow  
Structure,  
1960. Private  
collection.



of the 1960s, Lahoda's claim concerning the 'moderation' of Czech Modernism becomes more justifiable.

In historic terms, the problem of artistic freedom in Eastern Europe during this period takes on many different forms. Whereas in Poland and Czechoslovakia the notion of freedom of expression was more or less identified with abstraction and, consequently, *Art informel* functioned there as its ideal,

in Bulgaria it was limited to only 'slight' departures from the Socialist Realist canon. The Bulgarian political 'thaw' was rather superficial. The situation was further complicated by the lack of a local tradition of independent art. The artistic culture in Bulgaria, from the very foundation of the modern Bulgarian state at the end of the nineteenth century operated under the state patronage system. Because this system was still in place during the interwar period, the

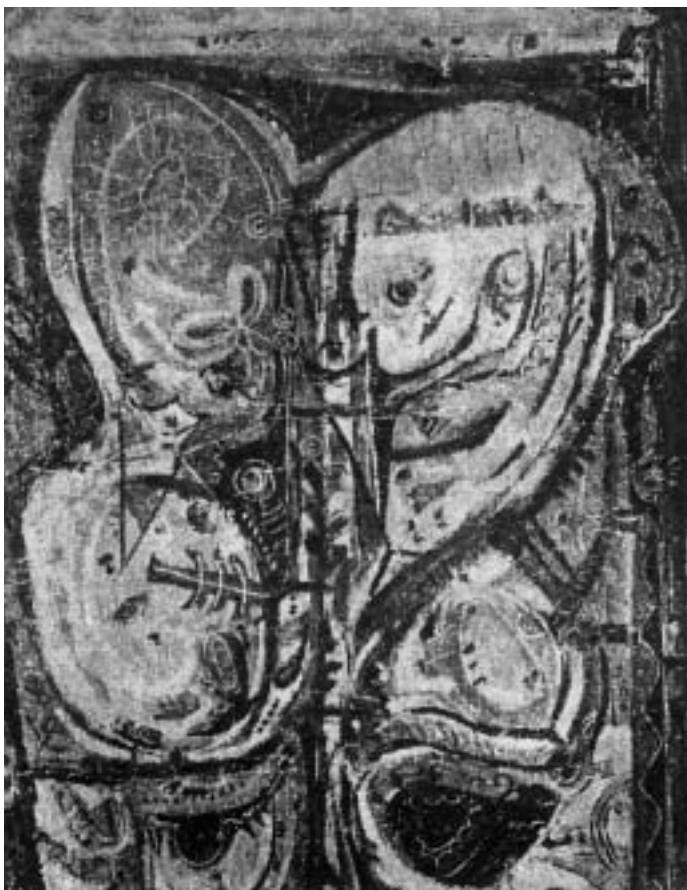


37. Aleš Veselý,  
*Painting-Object*,  
1960–64.  
Private  
collection.

Communists who seized power after the World War II did not face a major obstacle. They simply took over the pre-war arrangement. In the early 1960s, when the first signs of the coming 'thaw' began to appear, Bulgarian artists had nothing to refer to. They could neither reference a local tradition of the freedom of expression and creation nor an independent cultural sphere or tradition of opposition to bureaucratic and political dictatorship. Consequently, the 1961 exhibition, which revealed the existence of the so-called 'April Generation' and which was supposed to constitute a break with the terror of Socialist Realism, was in reality only its modification. Its 'oppositional' character was manifested at most in a greater colourist and iconographic range as well as timid references to the tradition of Post-Impressionism. In effect, the work of the 'April Generation', whose main protagonists soon came to power within the Bulgarian Association of Artists, was, in reality, only a slightly 'modernized' version of Socialist Realism. The Association, which was the only organization of its kind in the country, had monopoly control over all Bulgarian art venues, including the National Gallery, which was not directed by an art historian but by an official appointed by the Association. Although examination of the works produced by the painters of the 'April Generation' leaves little doubt as to the validity of this conclusion, the members themselves continue to insist that they created a real revolution in Bulgarian art in 1961 and that the art they produced was truly liberated.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the liberation of art from political and bureaucratic patronage and a creation of alternative forms of artistic expression took place in Bulgaria only in the mid-1980s, by then within the scope of post-Modernism, rather than Modernism.

The short-lived Romanian 'thaw' that began with the coming to power of Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1965 would be ended at the beginning of the 1970s. It gave way to one of the most repressive and brutal versions of Communism in Eastern Europe. Although by 1965 Romanian artists did not pay as much attention to *Art informel* as they did ten years earlier and were much more attracted to the more interesting and dynamic manifestations of the neo-avant-garde, nonetheless one could still find here a few traces of the *Art informel* thinking. One of the catalysts of the Romanian 'thaw' was the 1965 retrospective exhibition of one of the key figures of Romanian Modernism, Ion Tuculescu. The artist, who died in 1962, continued as late as the 1950s and '60s to paint canvases that recalled the works of the early twentieth-century French avant-garde tradition of Picasso, Matisse, Fauvism and a more generally colourist and post-Impressionist painterly approach. Although Tuculescu's decorative yet vibrant use of colour could have been close to the value system most fully embodied in *Art informel*, the artist never entirely eliminated figurative references from his work. Moreover, his paintings were always a

38. Ciprian Radovan,  
*Affected Universe*,  
c. 1966.



result of conceptual planning, that is, composition, and not pure process, that is, gesture. He never managed to venture beyond the decorative qualities of classic Modernism. However, those boundaries between classic and late Modernism were breached by László Albert and Ciprian Radovan, virtually the only painters living in Romania whose names can be mentioned in the context of the East European reception of *Art informel*. The works Radovan painted in the mid-1960s were close in conception to those of Wols, whom the Romanian artist quite self-consciously invoked in his written statements (illus. 38).<sup>40</sup>

The historic and artistic situation in Romania was quite unique. While in Czechoslovakia and Poland *Art informel* was in the late 1950s the most radical manifestation of the artists' resistance to the visual logic of Socialist Realism as well as an expression of the existential ideology of freedom, still associated in much of Eastern Europe with Paris, in Romania, where the 'thaw' began much later, it was not *Art informel*, but the neo-avant-garde that performed an

analogous function. It should be added that the Romanian neo-avant-garde continued to develop even after Ceaușescu rescinded his promise to liberalize culture. Unfortunately, its history is still little known outside of Romania.

There was a very different political, social, and artistic situation in Hungary. As in Romania, the belated ‘thaw’ began here in the mid-1960s. Yet unlike in Czechoslovakia, it was never interrupted by an invasion of foreign-allied troops. It continued to develop slowly but steadily, especially in the economic arena, till the end, that is until the fall of Communism. In the early 1960s Hungary began its evolution towards a specific version of ‘goulash’ Communism whose cultural policy was based on the famous doctrine of ‘3 × T’ – ‘Túrni, Tiltani, Támogatni’, or ‘Tolerate, Prohibit, Support’. Although the Hungarian cultural policies were much more restrictive than those imposed in Poland, particularly in the 1970s, they were also much more liberal than those in Czechoslovakia, especially during the period of the so-called ‘normalization’.

Because of the lateness of the Hungarian ‘thaw’, we are also dealing with quite different art-historic circumstances. By the mid-1960s, *Art informel*, which became so popular in Czechoslovakia and Poland, was already out of date. The Hungarian artists looking to the West for inspiration in their search for a means of resistance against Socialist Realism took up a different, more current and, one could say, more appropriate style for the ‘goulash’ Communism tendency, namely Pop art.<sup>41</sup> Regardless of this unique ‘leap’, there still persists in Hungary a need to produce a ‘harmonious’ account of the historic development of Hungarian art that is compatible with the Western European standards. However, for obvious reasons, production of such a ‘standard’ narrative is quite difficult. László Beke writes that the simplest way to describe Hungarian art would be to consider it in terms of the Western European (and later American) avant-garde formations of the 1960s. Yet, he adds in the same sentence, that ‘that is impossible’.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, Beke composed his essay precisely in this manner. He seeks and finds Hungarian equivalents for particular Western artistic tendencies. In a section dealing with ‘lyrical abstraction and *Art informel*’, Beke observes that the general attitudes that underpinned this type of production could be traced to the Szentendre art colony. However, they developed fully outside that environment, though perhaps not entirely in isolation from its influence, in the work of Krisztián Frey and Endre Tót.<sup>43</sup> In 1964 Tót, whose work bears much more affinity with *Art informel* than with Frey’s ‘calligraphic’ painting, wrote that he was ‘joining the most current tendencies in the world of art, approaching the international avant-garde’.<sup>44</sup> He was quite clearly mistaken; the situation was much more complicated.<sup>45</sup>

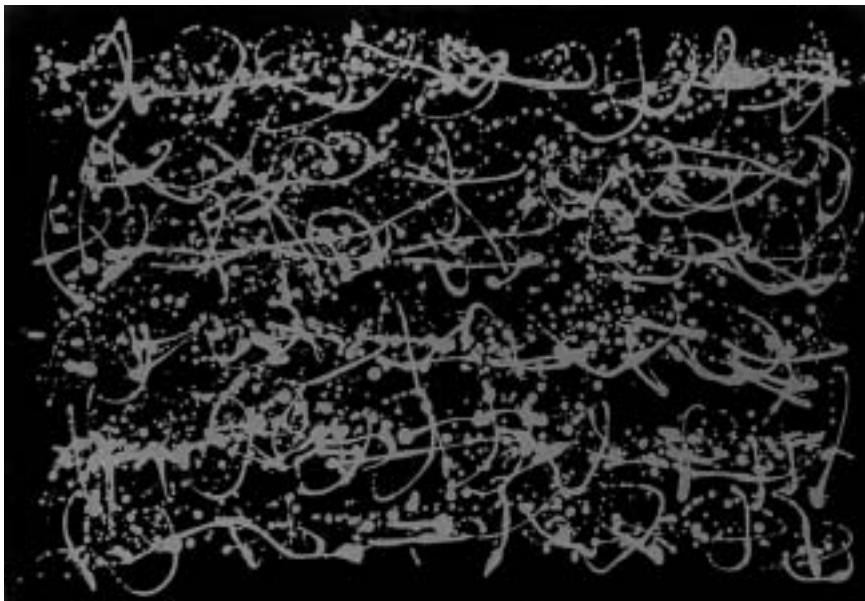
In the first place, one can already find traces of *Art informel* in Hungarian art in the second half of the 1950s, although the main sources of inspiration are

provided by *art autre* and *art brut*, rather than *Art informel* as such. These Hungarian developments are to a certain extent comparable with the Western European artistic developments of the late 1940s and early '50s, as well as those in Poland and Czechoslovakia in the late 1950s. In particular, I have in mind the drawings of Miklós Erdély, who would become a key figure of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde. Secondly, it is necessary to specify the historic relations between the European School, namely the Szentendre group, and younger artists, who were more interested in post-war European Modernism than its classic, pre-war manifestations. One of the most important artists of that group was Dezső Korniss, whose Budapest studio 'became an important point of reference for many young artists in the fifties and sixties'.<sup>46</sup> His calligraphic paintings were to a large extent shaped by his extended visit to Western Europe, which must have enhanced his status among Hungarian artists who could not leave their country and who did not have access to the most basic information about the international contemporary art of the late 1950s. Korniss changed his approach several times over the course of his career.<sup>47</sup> His early works embraced the Szentendre programme based on emulation of folk culture. Later he joined the European School, developing Surrealist and figurative references in his paintings. However, from the perspective of our discussion, his most significant works were those he executed in the late 1950s, which recall the stylistic approach of Mark Tobey (illus. 39).

Finally, returning to Endre Tót, it is clear that his works possess characteristic, one could even say salient, features of the painting of gesture: the broadly applied *impasto*, dynamic brushwork reflecting the unencumbered gesture of the artist, vivid pigment and large planes of colour. However, on closer inspection, one will also frequently find fragments of newspaper photos and text, stencilled words and pieces of the Hungarian flag (illus. 40): elements characteristic of an approach constituting an implicit criticism of the Modernist mythology of abstract Expressionism (to use the American term) found in the works of such artists as Jasper Johns or Robert Rauschenberg. Those 'quotations' of the 'low-brow', mundane reality and mass culture, mixed with references to 'high' culture and art, constituted a potent critique of Modernism and its ideology of the autonomy of art, its isolation from the banality of everyday existence. In fact, a similar strategy could also be found in Czechoslovakia, for instance in the so-called *lettrist* paintings of Eduard Ovčáček (*Sešívany Painting*, 1963). László Lakner would take more decisive steps towards elimination of *Art informel* references in favour of the iconography and approach associated with Pop art in the mid-1960s (*Rembrandt Study*, 1966). If in Tót's work *Art informel* formed the original

background for a series of citations (numbers, stencilled inscriptions, photographs), in Lakner's work dripping paint functions as no more than an echo of *Art informel*, within the repeatedly reproduced image of Rembrandt. The references to Pop art would perform in Hungary an analogous function to those performed by *Art informel* in Czechoslovakia and Poland; they constituted an expression of a desire to be a European, to participate in contemporary culture and to embrace its values.

The critique of Modernism which appeared in American art of the late 1950s and '60s, is a well-known subject, dealt with extensively by critics associated with the postmodern revisions of the art-historic discourse. It is notable, however, that we can also find traces of such a critique in Eastern Europe or, more precisely, in Hungary, a country that unlike Czechoslovakia or Poland did not experience the development of late Modernism. Here, the frame of reference for contemporary modernity was created by reminiscences of classic Modernism extended into the post-war period by the European School. Yet Hungary was also the country that was the first in Eastern Europe to develop signs of a uniquely formulated ideology of consumerism. Of course, low standards of living did not allow full development of a Western-style consumer society anywhere in Eastern Europe. Even in Hungary, 'goulash Communism', which constituted the fullest form of the ideology of Communist consumerism, created at best a caricature of a consumer culture. This is obvious to anyone who lived in this part of Europe in the 1960s and '70s.



39. Dezső  
Korniss,  
*Calligraphy*,  
1959. Janus  
Pannonius  
Museum, Pécs.



Nonetheless, the background of the socio-political processes taking place in Hungary was formed by the visibility within the official rhetoric of the language of consumerism mixed with citation of classic Marxist theorists. This was the context of Tót's paintings from the mid-1960s as well as of the unique response to *Art informel* in Hungary, which appears to have contained its implicit critique and the possibility of transgression of the Modernist paradigm.

One must ask, however, what is the significance of Tót's critique of *Art informel* in a country that did not have a developed tradition of *Art informel*? Similarly, what could be the significance of his references to mass culture in a country that, for all practical purposes, did not have such culture? It is most likely that those were symptoms of a formal response to Western art, or to put it in a different way, of a wholesale adoption and transplantation of ready-made strategies from Western European and American art into a very different cultural context. But that different context gave those strategies a very specific meaning, quite unlike the one they had originally. The significance of Tót's work does not rest in its performance of cultural criticism, more precisely, in

40. Endre Tót,  
*On the Street*,  
1965.

a critique of the Modernist system of artistic values, but, similarly to the classic *Art informel* and matter painting in Czechoslovakia and Poland, in its effort to establish a contact with the sphere of genuine contemporary art. Paradoxically from the perspective of Anglo-American Pop art, it is also an attempt to establish contact with ‘universal culture’ conceived as a remedy for the ideological and political instrumentalization of art by the regimes of the Soviet Bloc.

# 4

## Myths of Geometry

In 1948, when the rest of the Eastern European countries within the Soviet Bloc experienced intensification of Stalinism, the Communist leader of Yugoslavia, Marshal Josip Broz Tito, broke his alliance with the Soviet Union. With this step, Yugoslavia gained political independence in the conduct of its foreign affairs (skilfully explored by Tito) and embarked on a series of economic and cultural reforms aimed at improving the internal situation. If one were to analyse the history of Yugoslavia under Tito's rule, one would be justified in assuming that the Marshal's decision to leave Big Brother was the right one. The citizens of the other Eastern Bloc countries, who fared much worse under Stalin and his successors, observed with undisguised envy the new status of Yugoslavia and certain privileges enjoyed by its population, in particular the ability to travel abroad and to pursue business opportunities. But their efforts to follow the Yugoslav example often ended in tragedy. The Prague Spring was violently suppressed by Warsaw Pact troops on the twentieth anniversary of the Yugoslav secession. In Romania, independence from Big Brother benefited neither the citizens of the country nor its dictator, ominously referred to as a new incarnation of Count Dracula or the 'Genius of the Carpathians'. Much the same could be said about Albania.

In Yugoslavia, the internal reforms and the country's openness to the West, motivated to a large extent by economic considerations, gained momentum in the 1970s, precisely at the time when Czechoslovakia was entering the dark period of 'normalization'. However, only a few East Europeans realized that these external signs of liberalization had not led to similar political reforms. In fact just the opposite was the case. In Yugoslavia, a relatively prosperous country (by Eastern European standards), critiques of the power system had little popular support. For that reason, the local police was able to hunt down groups of intellectuals who did not approve of any version of Communism, local or otherwise, and nationalists, who would come into power after Tito's

death. Perhaps this partly explains the eventual failure of Yugoslavia and the origin of the conflicts that tore apart this multi-ethnic state at the end of the twentieth century.

Naturally, in Yugoslavia as elsewhere, various political processes intersected within the cultural sphere. I say ‘naturally’ because in Yugoslavia, just as in any other country of post-war Communist Europe, regardless of its distance from Moscow, culture functioned as a kind of substitute for a political life. Due to the restrictions imposed on the freedom of the political institutions, it was culture that afforded the opportunity for expression of political ambitions and dissident ideas, generally in a more or less (usually more than less) covert form. The various Communist regimes of the so-called ‘Eastern’ Europe, which included Yugoslavia, adopted different strategies for dealing with this phenomenon. However, they all agreed on two points: there was to be zero tolerance for open criticism of the power system and, at the same time, a more or less lenient attitude (with a few infamous exceptions) towards modern art that did not conform to the ideals of Socialist culture but remained disengaged from politics.

During the period following the post-Stalinist ‘thaw’, in some countries this tolerance had a rather extensive character; in others, it manifested itself in the fact that the regime, in its magnanimity, would not sentence artists who adhered to Modernism to long prison terms and would ‘limit itself’, using police and administrative methods, to isolating them and marginalizing their works. In comparison with the Stalinist period that certainly constituted a kind of progress; nonetheless, it created what a Hungarian critic referred to as a ‘velvet prison’.<sup>1</sup> In this respect each country faced a different situation. The Communist Europe from Bulgaria and Romania to the GDR, and from the Soviet Union to Poland and Yugoslavia, was in many ways, including implementation of cultural policies, less than homogenous. Still, in every country the situation facing politically engaged and critical art (if such art even existed) was quite different from that encountered by politically neutral, formal and autonomous experiments of Modernism. In general, Modernism and, in particular, abstraction had much more freedom. The Communist authorities were much less fearful of Modernist universalism, the cult of form and the autonomy of the work of art, than of critical approaches that analysed the system of power. Conversely, during the post-Stalinist period, Modernist art, precisely because of its political disengagement and emphasis on universal values, provided the artists and other inhabitants of the cultural field with virtually the only safe means of expressing veiled political views. Above all, Modernism offered a way to resist the Socialist, Stalinist conception of art, which reduced creativity to production of propaganda controlled by the

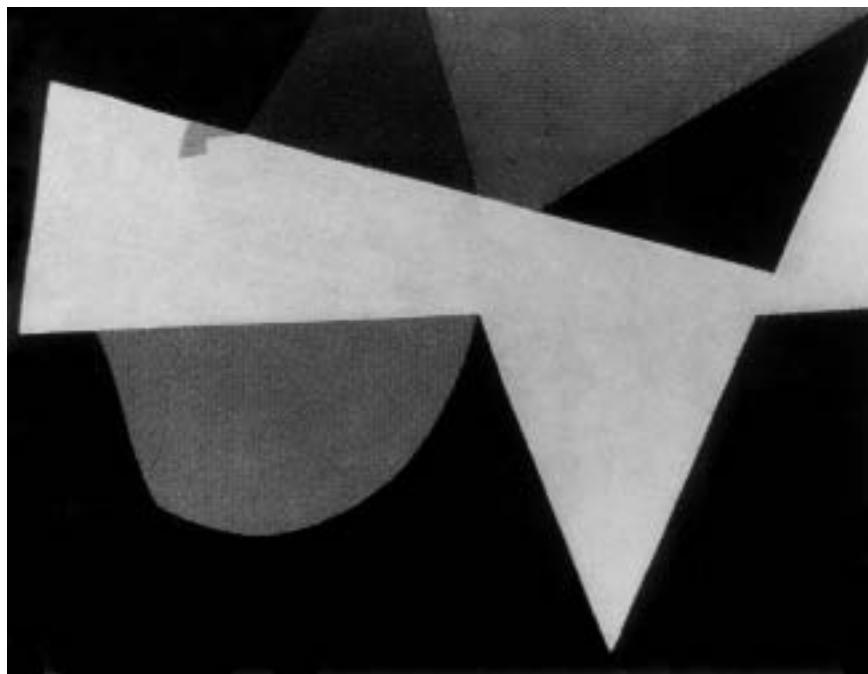
Politburo secretaries. In this context, Modernist art was perceived as an expression of ‘European’ ambitions and a protest against the Soviet dictatorship in culture. This dynamic could be seen within the reception of *Art informel* in Eastern Europe,<sup>2</sup> as well as of neo-Constructivism, which had a much more significant, broader and longer-lasting impact on East European art than *Art informel*.

Yugoslavia was one of the countries in which tolerance towards modern culture was rather extensive, though this did not mean that Modernist tendencies were able to develop without any hindrance. Tito’s Communists were quite reluctant to give up power within the domain of culture and frequently engaged in polemic exchanges with artists and critics.<sup>3</sup> For instance, when it seemed that the battle for the freedom of art was won, the Yugoslav regime, rather unexpectedly, launched a counter-offensive. Early in 1963 the highest-ranking party and state officials, including Tito himself, began criticizing abstraction.<sup>4</sup> To this day it is unclear why this happened. Jure Mikuž, quoted by Ješa Denegri in his study of the art in the 1960s, suggests that this campaign against abstraction was inspired by Khrushchev’s negative reaction to modern art and his own campaign, conducted during approximately the same period, against modern and independent culture in the USSR.<sup>5</sup> Fortunately, the Yugoslav campaign did not have the same results as the one carried out in the Soviet Union. The situation in Yugoslavia quickly improved.

Modern art continued developing in the country with little interference in the space between neo-Constructivism, on the one hand, and *Art informel*, on the other. The latter tendency, though perhaps less significant here than in Poland or Czechoslovakia, was still quite popular.<sup>6</sup> According to several Yugoslav art historians, *Art informel*, which developed in the late 1950s, mainly in Belgrade, could be seen as a response or a negative reaction to the popularity of neo-Constructivism, which had its main centre in Zagreb.<sup>7</sup> Seen in the context of other East European countries, the Yugoslav relationship between those two tendencies was rather unique. Here, as we will see, the return to Constructivism was a reaction against the earlier phase of *Art informel*, and not the other way around. It is also likely that regional ambitions and rivalries between Croatian Zagreb and Serbian Belgrade played a significant role in the development of that relationship.

Although neo-Constructivism did not have a long tradition in Croatia compared to Poland and Hungary, not to mention the Soviet Union, it developed here with a great deal of dynamism. The extent of its local history was limited to the activities of a small group of artists gathered around the journal *Zenit* in the pre-war period. However, in the 1960s Zagreb became a key international centre of neo-Constructivism thanks to ‘New Tendencies’, a

41. Vlado Kristl,  
*Composition*,  
1952.  
Museum of  
Contemporary  
Art, Zagreb.



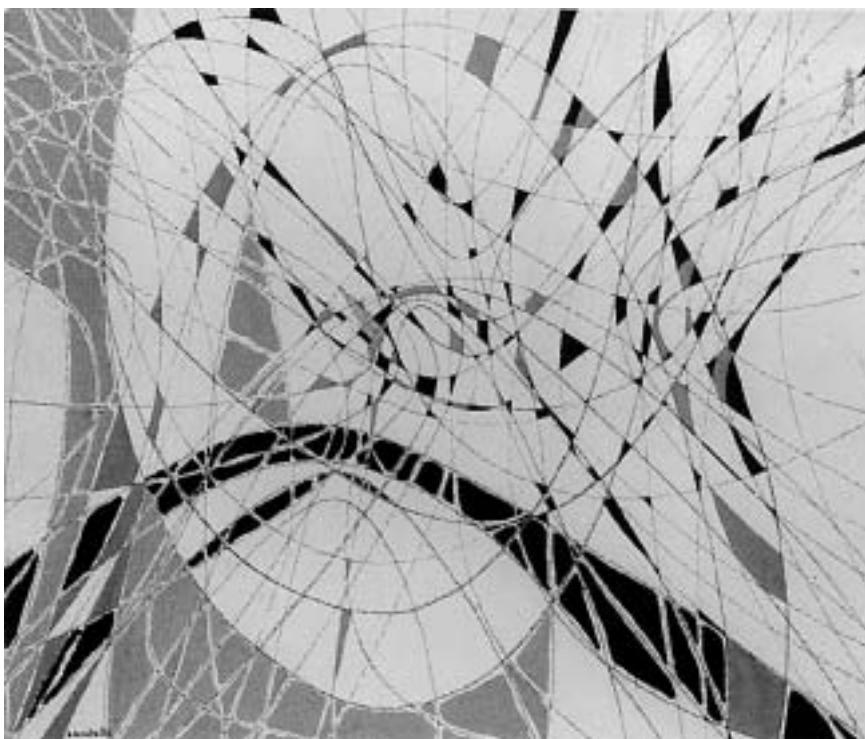
series of regularly held exhibitions organized between 1961 and the end of the 1970s, which brought together Eastern European and Western artists.<sup>8</sup> The 'New Tendencies' became one of the key points of reference for East European neo-Constructivism.

The exhibitions were inspired by the activities of the Croatian group EXAT-51. The group, founded in 1951, was the first Modernist collective founded in post-war Yugoslavia.<sup>9</sup> Although it was formed a few years after Tito's secession from the Soviet Bloc, it had to operate within a still tense environment dominated by Stalinist methods of cultural control. Those few years at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the '50s clearly demonstrate that Yugoslav secession did not translate into cultural liberalization. Such liberalization came later and was an effect of a completely different, mainly economic strategy, rather than a result of outright acceptance of the principle of the freedom of expression by the authorities. During the early 1950s, the Yugoslav regime, just like the other regimes of Eastern Europe, had no tolerance for 'formalism'. That is the main reason why the artists connected with EXAT-51, Aleksandar Srnec (illus. 42), Ivan Picelj (illus. 43), and Božidar Rašica (illus. 44), exhibited their works at the Paris Salon des Réalités Nouvelles unofficially, that is without the support of the Yugoslav government.<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, this constituted the first significant appearance of modern artists

from the other, Eastern side of the Iron Curtain at a major international art event organized by the post-war European avant-garde. It suggested, irrespective of whether the artist's participation was 'official' or 'unofficial', that Yugoslavia would be the first to reject the Stalinist doctrine in its cultural policy.

The first exhibition of EXAT-51 at home also had an 'unofficial' character. It was organized in 1952 in the apartment of Ivan Picelj, one of the group's members. The group's first 'official' show took place at the beginning of 1953 in the venue operated by the Association of Architects of Croatia, due to the fact that several members of the group, in particular Zdravko Bregovac and Vjenceslav Richter, were practising architects. Other members of EXAT-51, above all Vlado Kristl (illus. 41) and Aleksandar Srnec, were involved in the founding of the famous School of Animated Film in Zagreb.<sup>11</sup>

EXAT-51 announced its goals on 7 December 1951 at the Association of Visual and Applied Artists of Croatia (ULUBUH). The group's programme was not very sophisticated. It mentioned freedom of expression and experimentation, called for art practice that would provide a synthesis of all art media and, at the same time, would combat obsolete ideas and actions that impeded the development of modern art. Želimir Koščević notes that Socialist Realism and



42 Aleksandar Srnec, *Drawing*, 1952–3, Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

traditional Croatian realistic painting, very popular at the time among local artists, provided the negative frame of reference for the group.<sup>12</sup> Also, the programme of EXAT-51 contained elements directly referencing the situation within the Croatian art scene. It emphasized the necessity of being able to express differences of opinion. This appeal should be read as a call for greater pluralism in art and for the break-up of the party's monopoly on culture.

The artists of EXAT-51 also emphasized the positive impact and far-reaching potential of their programme, claiming that development of the principles of non-objective art would expand and enhance the artistic culture of their country.<sup>13</sup> Those claims turned out to be correct. The members' high level of artistic productivity, combined with a large number of exhibitions and architectural projects, including those in interior design and, in particular, the development of the idea of a recurring exhibition, which led to the 'New Tendencies', made Zagreb into one of the most interesting and dynamic art centres associated with neo-Constructivism. Of course, in many instances, the



43. Ivan Picelj,  
*Composition*  
XI-I, 1952/1956.  
Museum of  
Contemporary  
Art, Zagreb.

44. Božidar Rašica,  
*Composition*,  
1952.  
Museum of  
Contemporary  
Art, Zagreb.



works created by the individual members of EXAT-51 either departed from pure neo-Constructivism or retained only vague and loose associations with the trend. This tendency of the Croatian artists to deviate from the normative practice of neo-Constructivism was part of a much broader phenomenon of syncretism found throughout the 'other' Europe. It was accompanied by an unorthodox attitude towards tradition, identified, at least in this instance (in contrast to the other countries in the region), with external, mainly Parisian, artistic milieus.

According to Koščević, EXAT-51 was grounded in three factors: first, the Croatian tradition of the avant-garde, namely the circle of artists around the journal *Zenit*, published in the early 1920s; second, the Modernist tradition of architecture, still relevant for the local architects, some of whom had an opportunity to study before World War II with the most important European masters of Modernist architecture; and third, the tradition of the revolutionary Soviet art, in particular its utilitarian programme, which excited the imaginations of the Zagreb artists.<sup>14</sup> Those three elements, together with the political situation that encouraged development of international artistic

ambitions, had a significant impact on the authority of EXAT-51 and its influence over the artistic scene in Croatia. That influence culminated in the organization of the ‘New Tendencies’, held for the first time in 1961, which became the most significant international art event for neo-Constructivism in Eastern Europe.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of neo-Constructivism for Yugoslavia, especially Croatian art. In short order, it began to function as a quasi-official style. Neo-Constructivist works filled exhibitions, the style dominated public and industrial art commissions, it was chosen for public monuments and official expositions. It displaced shallowly rooted Socialist Realism, which lost the majority of its sympathizers not only among artists, but also among the members of the political establishment in the wake of the 1963 abortive campaign against abstraction. Bojana Pejić writes that almost all the Yugoslav monuments dedicated to the Communist revolution and liberation of the country had a Modernist and not Socialist Realist form. However, this did not mean that the figurative representations of the Communist leaders – Lenin, Marx, and especially Tito – were eliminated from the public Yugoslav iconosphere.<sup>15</sup>

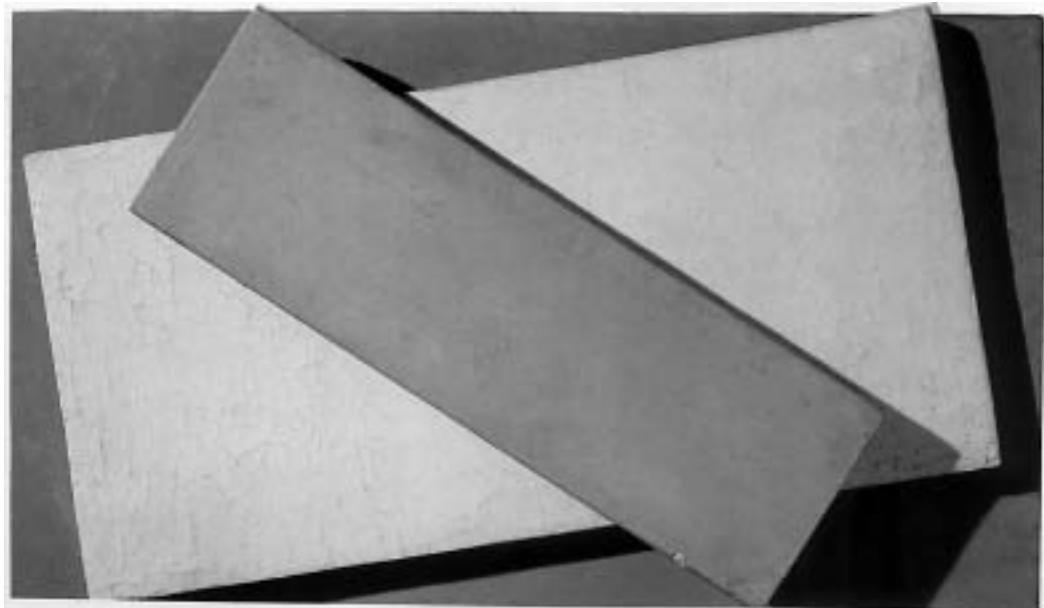
The phenomenon of institutionalization or appropriation of Modernism within the structures of the official art in Yugoslavia is much broader than neo-Constructivism.<sup>16</sup> However, there is no doubt that of all the countries of the Eastern Bloc, Yugoslavia embraced neo-Constructivism most enthusiastically and to the fullest institutional extent, surpassing even Poland, a country with a local historic tradition of Constructivism cultivated by Muzeum Sztuki (the Museum of Art) in Łódź, one of the oldest museums of modern art in the world. Yet, the Yugoslav regime began tolerating neo-Constructivist initiatives much earlier than the Polish Communist authorities. This was more likely the result of a *laissez-faire* attitude towards cultural matters, rather than a conscious implementation of a particular cultural policy.

The situation of neo-Constructivism in the GDR was quite different. In many respects the case of East Germany is quite unique, in particular with regards to the issue of artistic traditions. Whereas West Germany (or the Western occupied zone) began in the post-war period from the position of a blank slate in many areas of social and cultural life, rapidly attempting to reestablish the links with Modernism that had been interrupted by the Nazi regime, the situation in East Germany was much more complicated.<sup>17</sup> The main point of reference here was the German leftist revolutionary tradition associated with realism and Expressionism. This selective approach to the past, buttressed by the doctrine of Soviet Socialist Realism, eliminated from the East German cultural policy any interest in the local tradition of the avant-garde and – more broadly – of modern art, including Constructivism and Dada.

One can observe this attitude among the ruling elite as well as members of the independent art circles. In fact, one could say that almost the only East German artist who in the 1950s and '60s preserved and continued to develop the Modernist tradition was Hermann Glöckner (illus. 45). Glöckner was indeed a unique figure in the history of European art, even though he never made the front pages of art history books published in the West. Glöckner had a tremendous prestige among the members of the so-called 'independent' art circles in the GDR. One could even say that he had a real following, which may account for the fact that he was entirely ignored by the state and its official cultural institutions. The only GDR institution that consistently showed interest in Glöckner's art was the Kupferstich-Kabinett in Dresden, largely due to the personal involvement of its director, Werner Schmidt. His work only began receiving serious attention in the 1990s, after his death.<sup>18</sup>

Glöckner's tremendously productive career began in the years leading up to World War I. He continued to work right up to his death at the age of 98. Although both Constructivism and neo-Constructivism can be seen in his diverse body of work, they constituted only a part of his *oeuvre*. The artist himself would often say: 'Above all, and in principle, I am not a Constructivist'.<sup>19</sup> In response, the art historian Lóránd Hegyi wrote, 'Glöckner is a Constructivist who does not have any real opportunity to construct, or experimenter who cannot expand or disseminate his experiments'.<sup>20</sup> The artist's experiments focused not only on the visual construction of the image, but also on

45. Hermann Glöckner,  
*Red and Yellow Rectangles on a Blue Rectangle*,  
1955. Private collection.



exploration of diverse materials, including ordinary objects of everyday use (for instance boxes of matches), as well as on the development of spatial forms, within which the Constructivist tradition functioned as no more than a general reference that was usually interpreted in a highly idiosyncratic manner.

The scale of those works is very significant. Glöckner often produced small pieces in which the diminutive scale emphasized the personal and intimate character of the work. This aspect of Glöckner's art had little to do with the commitment to the civilizing mission of Modernist art so often professed by other neo-Constructivist artists, such as the members of the Croatian EXAT-51. In fact, Glöckner's work undermined that ideology. It was intimate and personal, and developed on the periphery of the totalitarian state without any expressed desire for refashioning the world. Its only aim was the work itself, the creation of refined and subtle paintings and objects, which the artist continued to produce throughout his long life.

The situation in Romania resembled in many respects that in the GDR, though neo-Constructivism developed there somewhat more broadly than in East Germany. The Romanian artists took full advantage of the few years of the 'thaw', which began in the mid-1960s under the country's new and initially quite liberal Communist leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu. Even though more than a dozen Romanian artists engaged in neo-Constructivist experiments, their impact was initially limited to the closed art scene of Timișoara.<sup>21</sup> There are several reasons for this situation, one major one being the briefness of the Romanian 'thaw'. In the early 1970s the Romanian regime became increasingly intolerant of the independent art scene. Ceaușescu soon transformed into one of the most horrifying dictators of Eastern Europe. Another related reason is the mass emigration of Romanian artists and intellectuals. Among those who left the country was Roman Cotosman, a leading figure of Romanian neo-Constructivism. One must also mention the lack of a distinct local tradition of Constructivism and relatively late development of interest in that tendency. By the late 1960s, when Romanian artists began embracing neo-Constructivism, Western contemporary art (always an important frame of reference for the entire Eastern Europe) was beginning to turn towards other trends, above all those influenced by a critique of a Modernist (including Constructivist) paradigm of art and reflecting a reaction against the academization of Constructivism.<sup>22</sup>

The brief episode of Romanian neo-Constructivism began in 1963, when Roman Cotosman returned from Paris and, inspired by the French Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel, founded Group III in Timișoara together with Stefan Bertalan and Constantin Flondor. At first, the group had a rather informal character. It functioned as a 'self-education workshop' that provided the artists

with an opportunity to discuss basic ideas of modern and abstract art and to conduct experiments. The group's official debut took place in 1966, when its members began to exhibit for the first time in public. In 1968, Group 111 had its first show in Bucharest and was joined by two other artists interested in neo-Constructivism, Zoltan Molnar and Diet Sayler. In 1969 the collective acquired an international reputation when it participated in the Biennale of Constructivism in Nuremberg. In 1970, a new group comprised of several younger artists, Sigma, formed around Bertalan and Flondor. It would function over the next few years as the artists' official exhibition platform at home and abroad. The same year, the members of Sigma completed their famous collective work, *Information Tower*, which encapsulates their visual and formal experiments. The work consists of a rather eclectic collection of metal geometric forms. By the mid-1970s, when the group dispersed, the individual members began to work independently.

The somewhat less than dynamic development of Romanian neo-Constructivism in the 1960s may have its roots in the specific character of the local avant-garde tradition. In the 1920s Romanian Constructivism was intertwined with a number of other parallel tendencies promoted by the journal *Contimporanul*, founded in 1922 by Marcel Janco and Jon Vinea, and the journal *Integral*, founded by Max Herman Maxy, which tended to focus much more on Constructivism itself. The city of Bucharest, a diverse and dynamic art centre with an established international reputation, was home to such notable artists as Victor Brauner, Hans Mattis-Teutsche, Cornelius Mihăilescu and Tristan Tzara.<sup>23</sup> However, many of them soon left the country and those who stayed behind were marginalized.

The long period of Stalinist terror that began shortly after the war interrupted the continuity of the Modernist tradition in Romania. The greatest impediment standing in the way of the development of neo-Constructivism was the political situation, in particular, the totalitarian control over culture which remained in place throughout the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, during the period when neo-Constructivism experienced its most dynamic development elsewhere. The example of Yugoslavia, a country with a far less rich tradition of the avant-garde, provides an interesting comparison that clearly demonstrates this point. In the 1920s there were only two Yugoslav journals associated with Constructivism: *Zenit*, founded in 1921 in Zagreb by Ljubomir Mincić, and *Tank*, established a few years later in Slovenia. But the status of modern art in Yugoslavia was quite different from that of Romania. According to Steven Mansbach, in the Balkans, unlike in Bucharest, modern art was implicated in the development and expression of national identity.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, despite a meagre historical background and because of the

favourable political situation, in particular the liberalization of cultural policies, neo-Constructivism had an opportunity to develop in Romania in the mid-1960s.

In contrast to Romania and Yugoslavia, Poland not only had a strong and well-defined tradition of Constructivist art, but that tradition was never interrupted, a fact that accounts for its importance to the post-war generation of artists. As we will see, the influence and function of the Constructivist tradition in Poland were quite different from Romania and Yugoslavia. With regard to the political context, the post-Stalinist Poland, despite restrictions imposed on the art scene by the Communist authorities, resembled Yugoslavia much more than Romania (let alone the GDR), even though Yugoslavian citizens enjoyed much greater freedom to travel abroad, superior economic infrastructure and ideologically indifferent cultural policies.

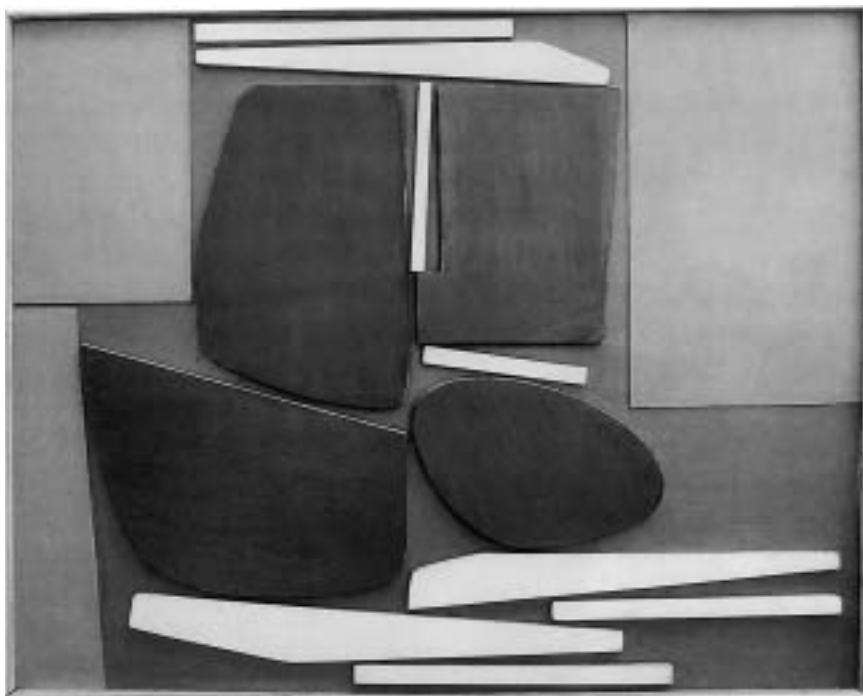
Although Poland lacked such prestigious initiatives as Zagreb's 'New Tendencies', in the late 1960s Constructivism (both the original art-historic movement and its contemporary manifestations) became an externally recognizable trademark of Polish art. Muzeum Sztuki [the Museum of Art] in Łódź, which in 1966 came under the leadership of Ryszard Stanisławski, played a key role in preserving the Constructivist tradition, in particular in providing a home for the materials gathered in the late 1920s by the artists affiliated with the 'a.r.' group. In 1931, Władysław Strzemiński, a key figure of the Polish pre-war avant-garde, donated the Artists' Collection amassed by 'a.r.' to the Muzeum Sztuki.<sup>25</sup> Stanisławski's successor, Jaromir Jedliński, continued to promote Constructivism into the 1990s.<sup>26</sup>

As a result, Constructivism became the most prominent and visible expression of the national and modern Polish art, and as such exerted enormous influence over the local art scene. The impact of Katarzyna Kobro and, in particular, of Władysław Strzemiński, who both died in the early 1950s, on several subsequent generations of Polish artists would be difficult to overestimate, especially since another major artist associated with the tendency, Henryk Stałewski, remained for years an active and highly influential figure within the Polish art scene. Henryk Berlewi, another founding father of Polish Constructivism, who lived abroad in the 1960s (he died in 1967), also played a significant role in promoting the tendency on the international arena, especially in France. In 1957 he organized an exhibition *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne* in Paris at the gallery of Denis René, with the goal of proving a historic overview of the movement.

This living, local tradition of Constructivism ensured that the Polish version of neo-Constructivism was relatively distinct and easily distinguishable from other forms of abstract art in the 1950s, for instance, *Art informel*. This

was not the case in other East European countries. In 1957, alarmed by what he saw as an invasion of abstractionism, tachism, gesture painting and matter painting, Julian Przyboś, a poet closely associated with Constructivism, wrote an essay entitled 'Abstract Art – How to Get out?' In it, he defended the local heritage of modern art, associated with the tradition of Constructivism, which was being showcased at precisely this time in the earlier mentioned exhibition in Paris, against what he considered to be superficial but widespread reception of *Art informel* among Polish artists.<sup>27</sup>

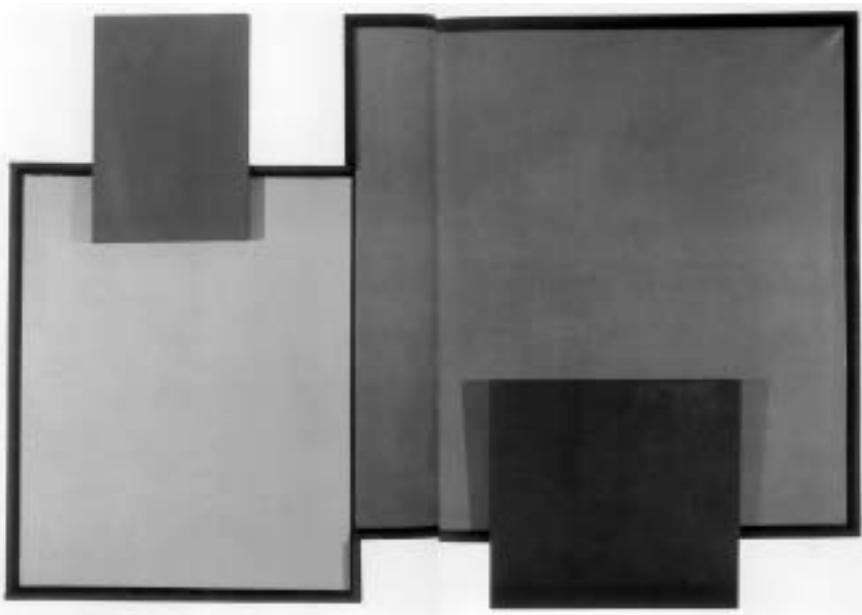
The main figure of Polish Constructivism in the late 1950s was Henryk Stażewski (illus. 46). Although the artist explored various directions in his work, even reaching for figuration in the 1940s, the mainstream of his *oeuvre* fits comfortably within the paradigm of Constructivism.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, multi-colour or monochrome subdivisions of the picture plane as well as geometric, flat and spatial forms situate Stażewski's work in relation to neo-Constructivism. Even in those instances when the harmony of compositional elements seems to be disturbed (or perhaps precisely because of that), there is little doubt as to the provenance of his art. One could say that Stażewski's talent consisted of a unique ability to subtly manipulate geometric forms and to use the aesthetic schemes of Constructivism in a completely unorthodox way.



46. Henryk Stażewski,  
*Composition*,  
1960. National  
Museum,  
Kraków.

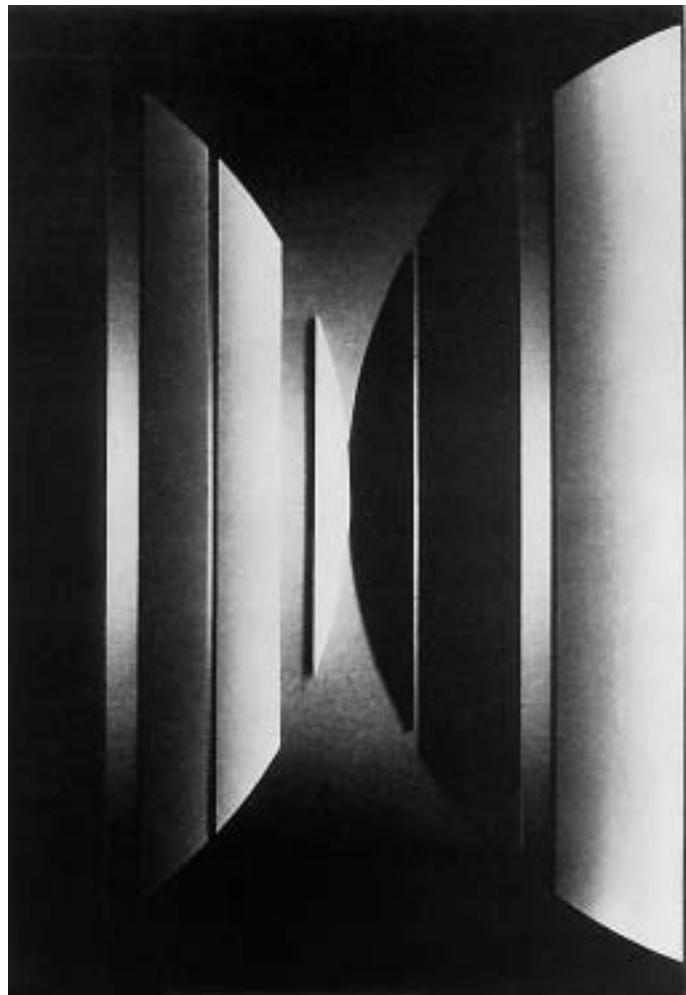
Of course, Stażewski was not the only Polish neo-Constructivist. There was a large group of artists who explored that movement. That group included Kajetan Sosnowski, who in the late 1960s created multi-panel constructions of canvases (illus. 47). Each element of the larger structure explored a different colour issue. Brought together as an arraignment of geometric forms, they formed a single, multicolour composition made up of different planes. It is interesting to note, however, that those neo-Constructivist experiments developed as a result of an entirely different set of the artist's experiments with colour in the late 1950s and early '60s. Originally, Stażewski's work was inspired by non-geometrical abstraction. His *Blank Pictures* approach the problem of colour and plane without any recourse to geometry.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, in contrast to Stażewski, the neo-Constructivist art of Sosnowski had a very different genesis and was rooted in a completely different experience of modernity.

As we will see, such a process was not at all unusual and can be observed in other East European countries, in particular Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Another Polish artist, Zbigniew Gostomski, created in the 1960s geometric *Optical Objects* (illus. 48), in which light and forms were superimposed on top of one another, creating a monochrome, aesthetically pure structure of plane and space based on the principles of equilibrium, contrast and harmony. It is worth noting that both Stażewski and Gostomski were connected with the legendary Warsaw Foksal Gallery. Founded in 1966, the Foksal Gallery was



47. Kajetan Sosnowski, *Fourfold Picture*, 1968. National Museum, Warsaw.

48. Zbigniew  
Gostomski,  
*Optical Object*  
XXXIV, 1965.  
Muzeum Sztuki,  
Łódź.



seen all over Eastern Europe as a symbol of the perseverance and continual development of the avant-garde in the midst of unfavourable (to put it mildly) political circumstances.

Another artist connected with the Foksal Gallery was the totally unorthodox (though also allied with Stażewski) Edward Krasiński. Mentioning Krasiński's name in the context of neo-Constructivism may seem rather problematic, since the artist defined himself as 'a Surrealist in life and almost Dadaist in art'.<sup>30</sup> However, if one considers that the source of Krasiński's art is a geometric form of a blue line, a line that transgresses space into infinity, a line that is absolute and totally autonomous,<sup>31</sup> then one is bound to notice the Constructivist roots of his approach. Both artists of the East (Rodchenko) and

of the West (Mondrian) used the line as a basic means of expression; its analysis was a major task of art. Krasiński took up the same task, though he chose an approach that took him far away from Constructivism. Julian Przyboś explicitly identified the origin of Krasiński's art in the mid-1960s with what he referred to as 'sculpture reduced to a line'. The poet analysed the artist's work *Spear*, which was shown in Osieki in 1963. The work consisted of a line 'conquering' space, which was suspended in mid-air (the strings that supported it were invisible). In the poet's opinion, Krasiński's piece developed ideas implicit in Katarzyna Kobro's work. Whereas Kobro, in her *Spatial Compositions* from the interwar period, dematerialized sculpture by eliminating mass, Krasiński did so by eliminating volume. Przyboś writes that:

Katarzyna Kobro opened the prison of the sculpted form; she liberated space in sculpture. Her compositions that defined the negative space assumed that space is continuous. They took for granted the existence of an infinite continuum . . . Because Krasiński's *Spears* have a certain thickness, one could consider them sculpted forms . . . But because of their colour, they do not register visually as volumes, elongated, rounded forms that possess mass. We do not see shafts or points, only faster and faster lines projected into space.<sup>32</sup>

The artist explored this problem further, using many lines (straight and curved) in his *Linear Sculptures* (1966) shown at the Gallery Foksal in the 1960s. He also 'found' the line (embracing the logic of the Surrealist *objet trouvé*) in ready-made objects, for instance in a telephone wire painted blue during his performance *Winter Assemblage – J'ai perdu la fin*, which took place at the Foksal Gallery in 1969. The colour of the wire turned out to be prophetic. When Krasiński's work, sent by ship, did not make it on time for the Tokyo Biennale, the artist sent a telex message from Warsaw in which he repeated the word 'blue' (in English) 5,000 times. This classic Dadaist chance event would define his art for years to come. Krasiński recalled, 'I was unable to do anything else because this was so radical; I couldn't turn back and make some silly pieces. I was immobilized and then all of a sudden I got my hands on a piece of a blue strip. That saved me'.<sup>33</sup> When many years later, after the death of Stażewski, with whom he shared a studio (illus. 49), Krasiński marked the interior of the Gallery Foksal at the height of 130 cm with a strip of blue tape popularly known as 'scotch', he observed, 'I don't know if this is art. But, without any doubt, this is scotch blue [in the original text, 'blue' in English]: width 19 mm, length unknown'.<sup>34</sup> By this gesture, as it were, the Constructivist tradition in Poland was fulfilled: through Stażewski, the hero of the exhibition, and through Krasiński, whose art realized the Constructivist dream. The line,

49. Edward Krasiński,  
Stażewski's  
Studio,  
installation at  
the exhibition  
'Der Riss im  
Raum', in  
Martin-  
Gropius-Bau,  
Berlin, 1994.



a basic element of an image, was transformed into an entity stripped of any symbolic association. Is such reification possible in a theoretical as well as historical sense, or is it one of the Modernist myths? I will return to this question in the closing section of this chapter.

The fusion of art and life or the elimination of boundaries between art and life is another Modernist myth often discussed in classic texts of Russian as well as Polish Constructivism. That challenge was taken up in a highly original and consistent way by one of the most interesting artists of Eastern Europe, Roman Opałka, who in 1965 started to make so-called 'counting pictures', with the idea of continuing the series until the end of his life, resulting in the last painting being unfinished. Before the Polish artist painted his first *Detail* from the series '1965/1–∞' (illus. 50), he produced prints and paintings which were interpreted in terms of Strzemiński's Unism. He himself often disagreed with such interpretations.<sup>35</sup> His *Chronomes* of 1961–63 or the later series *Description of the World* engaged the problem of the unification and reduction of the divisions within the picture plane. Moreover, some art historians consider the development of his 'counting pictures', which the artist

began producing in 1965, and which eventually became his sole focus, as a form of a 'dialogue' with Strzemiński.<sup>36</sup> His decision to discontinue 'counting pictures in colour', in which consecutive numbers were placed against a coloured background, seems to validate such conclusion. Following this line of argument, one could say that the artist's 1972 decision to begin lightening his paintings by adding one per cent more of white paint to the original black of the background in each successive canvas, while continuing to paint the number sequence in white, pointed towards a 'white on white' painting and, as such, could be seen as an update of Malevich's Suprematism. Therefore, from a strictly visual perspective, Opalka's art is certainly situated within the



50. Roman  
Opalka,  
1965/1–∞,  
*Detail 1–35327*  
(fragment).  
Muzeum Sztuki,  
Łódź.

analytic tradition of image-making, which encompasses Constructivism/Suprematism.

However, this observation is only partially valid. The meaning of Opałka's paintings is not contained within a single image, in a way that the meaning of a Unist (though not Suprematist) art certainly was. It is produced as a consequence of the *continuum*. Opałka's 'counting pictures', which quantify the artist's life, are, according to Andrzej Turowski, 'an attempt to visualize time with simultaneous conceptualization of the image'. The gradual lightening of the background in the direction of a white painting prefigures death. Turowski writes that in the white on white painting 'visualization of time finally overlaps with the conception of the image'. Therefore, 'the utopia of art is expressed through the eternity of Duration, and as such it replaces the illusion of life. The Finite in the Infinite. In it, like in a dream that is never recounted, will exist the never seen reality'.<sup>37</sup> Opałka's paintings are intrinsically connected to his life. They parallel its course, not in a metaphoric sense but through a particular kind of horizontal contiguity or, as Lóránd Hegyi put it, 'by an absolute tautology'.<sup>38</sup> The work of art has become radically and totally transparent to life. Those values negate the conception of autonomy integral to Unism, though one could see them as being consistent with other (different from Constructivist) avant-garde mythologies of the identity of life and art. The inscribed numbers do not refer to the surface of the canvas treated as an absolute value in and of itself, but to existence as such. One could say that they are existential *par excellence*.

Framed in this way, Opałka's work reaches beyond the utopia of the Unist picture and, by the same token, beyond the Constructivist paradigm that calls for the destruction of the boundary between art and life. Stażewski's work *Unlimited Vertical Composition: 9 Beams of Colour in the Sky* (illus. 51) is perhaps closer to that tradition. It was executed during the famous Polish symposium 'Wrocław '70'. In the work, Stażewski projected beams of coloured light against the background of the evening sky using powerful military searchlights. One could say that the artist transferred the rules of geometrical composition from the painter's canvas onto real space, thus passing through the physical threshold of the artwork's autonomy – its frame.

Zbigniew Gostomski took an even more radical step while remaining rooted within the tradition of geometric art in his work *It Begins in Wrocław*. Starting from a designated point in the city, the artist placed at regular intervals small, standardized objects which together formed a grid, the mythologized element of the Constructivist compositions. The expansion of the grid would eventually cover the entire world. Of course, Gostomski's project was never realized; it was never intended to be realized. It belonged within the sphere of

51. Henryk Stażewski,  
*Unlimited Vertical  
Composition:  
9 Beams of  
Colour in the  
Sky*, Wrocław,  
1970.

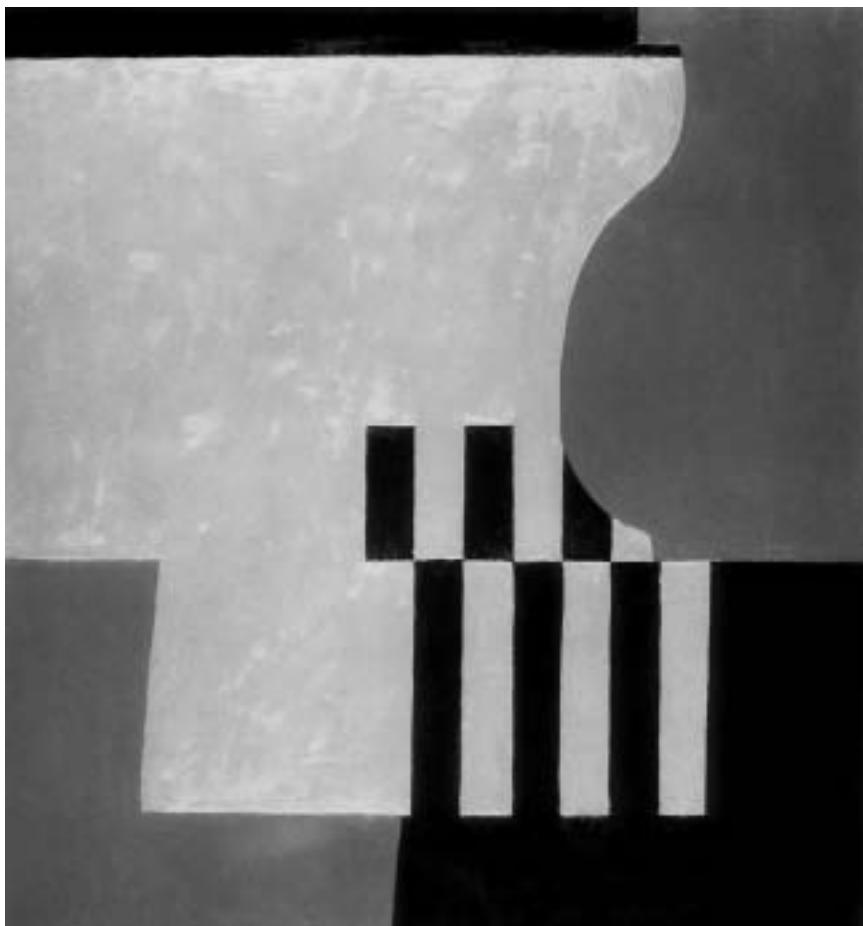


visionary or conceptual art, which was well represented in the exhibition that accompanied the 'Wrocław '70' symposium. This fact justifies the widely held view that 'Wrocław '70' marked a turning point in post-war Polish art, the break of the neo-avant-garde with Modernism, even though the latter was clearly indebted to the Modernist tradition of Constructivism and neo-Constructivism.<sup>39</sup> As we will see, in other countries of Eastern Europe, especially in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, similar exhibitions took place at approximately the same time, marking analogous breaks.

While in Poland the Constructivist tradition and its influence on modern art appears quite clear, according to László Beke, this was not necessarily the case in Hungary. The critic notes that it is difficult to define precisely the essence of that movement and its significance for the history of Hungarian art.<sup>40</sup> The path of the development of neo-Constructivism in Hungary is rather complicated, even though Lajos Kassák (illus. 52), the key figure of the European pre-war Constructivist avant-garde, came back to his country before the

war and even though many Hungarian artists (in particular János Fajó) continued to make explicit references to his work well into the 1960s. One should keep in mind that the local tradition of the avant-garde did not develop smoothly. Between the world wars, after the fall of the Soviet Republic of Hungary, the majority of the left-leaning avant-garde artists, including Kassák, emigrated to Vienna. Their relationship with the Republic's Communist regime was by no means satisfying. Because many, including Kassák, disapproved of its new cultural policies, the authorities closed the Constructivist journal *MA* that had been founded in 1916. *MA* would resume publication from Vienna in 1920.

According to Lóránd Hegyi, this 'Viennese period' of Hungarian Constructivism marked the end of the first, heroic stage of the Hungarian avant-garde (two more were to come).<sup>41</sup> It was in Vienna that Kassák developed



52. Lajos  
Kassák,  
*Monumental*,  
1966.  
Hungarian  
National  
Gallery,  
Budapest.

his highly influential concept of *Bildarchitektur*. Some of the émigrés, for example László Moholy-Nagy, stayed permanently in exile; others returned home after a few years and attempted to resume their artistic careers. This moment marks, according to Beke, the beginning of the long second phase in the development of Constructivism in Hungary.<sup>42</sup> They faced numerous difficulties from the regime of Admiral Horthy, and their work would acquire a much more directly political character. Kassák, who came back from Vienna in 1926, was seen by the younger generation of artists as the model of moral behaviour and social engagement.<sup>43</sup> In the midst of a conservative reaction, the avant-garde artists participated in political debates, and in the late 1920s Kassák began publishing *Munka*, a journal with a distinctly political character.

By the 1930s the Hungarian art scene was dominated by a distinct form of avant-garde syncretism, which combined different Modernist approaches with a national and folk revival propagated by the populist ideology of Béla Bartók. Constructivism did not play any role within Hungarian Modernism during the immediate post-war period, which was dominated by the eclectic approach of the European School and the Szentendre art colony. This was also the case at the time in the other major centre of Hungarian art, Pécs, dominated by the personality of Ferenc Martyn. This small town in the south of the country would eventually become the home of the dynamic neo-Constructivist group 'Movement '70' (*Mozgás '70*).

According to Lóránd Hegyi, *Mozgás '70* belongs to the third phase of Hungarian Constructivism, or rather neo-Constructivism, which began in the late 1960s and was shaped not so much by the local tradition of Constructivism as by influences from abroad, in particular hard-edge and colour-field painting as well as Minimalism.<sup>44</sup> In order to be fully understood, the third phase must be viewed from a historic perspective of the economic policies of the 'goulash Communism' introduced by János Kadar. This was a period of a dynamic development of neo-avant-garde practices, such as happenings, object art and conceptual art, for which Constructivism functioned as just one among many different references.<sup>45</sup>

Hungarian art historians agree that the late 1960s was a period of a major generation shift within post-war Hungarian art.<sup>46</sup> A key role within that shift was played by the legendary '*I PARTEV*' exhibitions organized in 1968 and 1969 by Péter Sinkovits on the premises of the Office of Architectural Planning in Budapest (the title of the shows is the Hungarian acronym of that institution). Just as in 1970 in Wrocław, one could find at the second *I PARTEV* exhibition of 1969 not only works referring to Constructivism, but also works produced within the sphere of conceptual art (for instance, works by Tamás Szentjóby).<sup>47</sup>

Returning to the first phase of post-war Hungarian Constructivism, it is important to take note of the circle of artists around Dezső Korniss, a key figure in the history of Hungarian art. This group included such notable figures as Endre Tót and Tamás Hencze. Korniss himself, an artist with a diverse body of work, was for a time associated with neo-Constructivism. Although Constructivism was clearly one of his points of Modernist reference, it was always connected in his work with idiosyncratically conceptualized Surrealism.<sup>48</sup> This form of eclecticism and syncretism characterized the artist's entire career. In the late 1940s and again after 1955, Korniss was associated with the European School through the Szentendre art colony, producing semi-abstract, lyrical and sometimes calligraphic paintings that resembled Mark Tobey's and Jackson Pollock's paintings. In the mid-1950s he began to produce works clearly influenced by Constructivism, which used large, regular geometric planes of pure colour. Although he continued working in this style into the 1960s, he also simultaneously produced drawings that embraced the conventions of gesture painting. In the 1950s Korniss also created a series of photomontages that made references to the tradition of Surrealism and in the early 1960s produced a series of canvases depicting quite unusual, unreal and vaguely 'fantastic' landscapes and cityscapes, executed in decorative and figurative style. Some time later, the artist created animated movies, and in the 1970s, towards the end of his career, he turned once again to abstraction, embracing the legacy of Malevich.

This kind of avant-garde syncretism, marked by the free movement between tendencies considered antagonistic in the West, was very characteristic of East European art. The significance of the artistic decision did not rest in the selection of a particular option, but in the general inscription of one's work into modern art. One could even say that the negative statement consisting of a rejection of official state-sanctioned art was in many ways more important than affiliation with a particular Modernist or avant-garde tradition. It is likely that this dynamic is connected to a certain idealization of culture, which was perceived as a field of resistance against the regime and expression of social and national aspirations.

This understanding of culture had its roots in the history of Eastern Europe, in particular in the nineteenth century, when many national groups within the region were prevented from articulating their political aspirations freely and directly. Almost everywhere, it was culture and not politics that provided an opportunity for unencumbered expression.<sup>49</sup> The declaration of one's Modernism had, in this context, a primarily ethical character: it was seen as a protest against the regime that imposed limitations on artistic freedom. Only in a secondary way did it express specific interests of a particular artist.

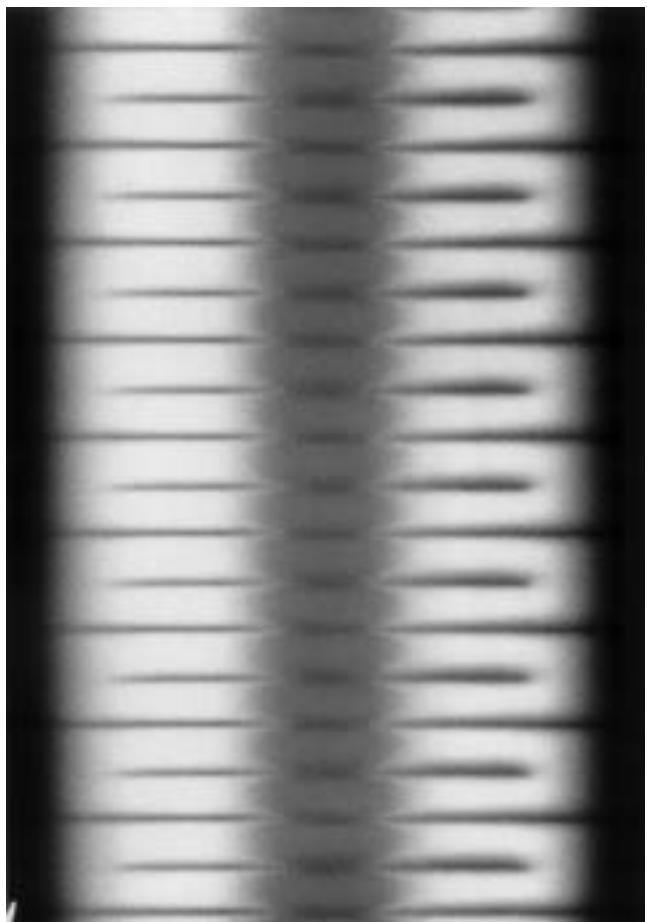
53. Tamás Hencze,  
*Description*,  
1965. Hungarian  
National  
Gallery,  
Budapest.



This attitude was supported by the existence of a considerable temporal and biographical distance between the contemporary situation and the specific, in this case Constructivist, tradition. Hungary and, to a certain extent though for different historical reasons, Czechoslovakia provide classic examples of this kind of attitude. By contrast Poland, where there was a close contact between contemporary art and the Constructivist tradition, this kind of free movement among different approaches, from *Art informel* and Surrealism to neo-Constructivism, was not very common. Moreover, recalling Julian Przyboś's defence of the 'native' tradition of abstract art against French *Art informel* imports, one could say that in Poland the boundaries separating different Modernist factions were remarkably well defined.

The opposite was true in Hungary. One could use Korniss's art as a case study. When in the early 1960s younger artists around Sándor Molnár, referred

54. Tamás Hencze,  
*Horizontal Structure*,  
1969.  
Hungarian National  
Gallery,  
Budapest.



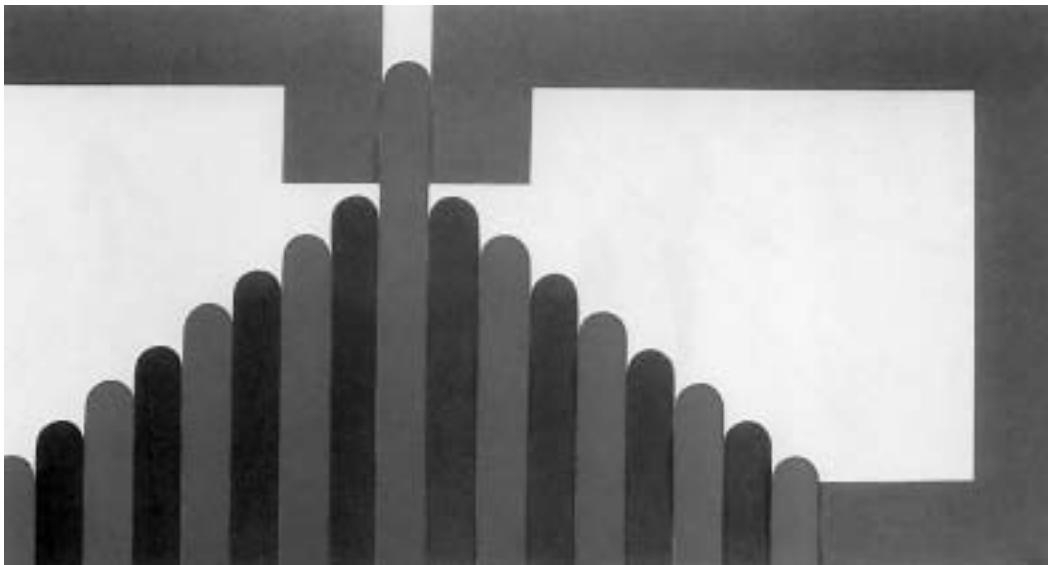
to as the ‘Zuglói Circle’ (Zuglói kör), began rejecting the conservative approach of the European School, they did not reveal any inclination towards stylistic orthodoxy. They looked with equal enthusiasm and interest to the so-called School of Paris, *Art informel*, American Abstract Expressionism and Constructivism, complementing their interest in Kandinsky with exploration of Mondrian and Malevich.<sup>50</sup> At approximately the same time, namely in the mid-1960s, Tamás Hencze simultaneously created two distinct bodies of work: canvases inspired by gesture painting, which recalled the works of Hans Hartung in their sweeping application of paint, and works that operated within the luminous, cool, quasi-metallic illusionism of Op-art (illus. 53, 54). They recalled the aesthetic of the Polish artist, Zbigniew Gostomski, who was Hencze’s contemporary.<sup>51</sup> Another artist, Imre Bak, a major figure of Hungarian neo-Constructivism and a member of the ‘Zuglói Circle’, demonstrated similar

flexibility by painting in the 1960s expressive and seemingly unstructured compositions as well as calmly geometric and decorative ones (illus. 55, 56). This habit of switching between different styles became a semi-permanent feature of the Hungarian art scene. For instance, in the early 1960s, István Nádler produced expressive, abstract paintings, in the second half of the decade he turned to neo-Constructivism, and in the 1980s he began to use an approach close to neo-Expressionism.

The history of the avant-garde tradition in Czechoslovakia, and particularly in Bohemia, also evolved in a unique way. During the interwar period, Prague was certainly one of the most interesting cultural centres of Europe, a fact that is still little known today despite considerable efforts by Czech art historians.<sup>52</sup> The development of Czech modern art began in the first decades of the twentieth century, when Czech artists started to emulate the newest Western European (in particular French) tendencies as a reaction against the conservatism of Vienna, the capital of the Habsburg empire, which was still dominated by the Vienna Secession. The desire to seek inspiration in Paris rather than in Vienna would define the orientation of Prague's art geography for many years to come. In addition, the presence of a wealthy and well-educated middle class played a key role in encouraging those kinds of interests and eventually led to the development of Czech Cubism, a phenomenon unique in Eastern Europe. Later, in the late 1920s and early '30s, the main influence of French art in Bohemia shifted to Surrealism, producing equally original and unique work.



55. Imre Bak,  
*Tache*, 1965.  
Private  
collection.



During the same period, Constructivism had a unique status in Czechoslovakia, a country formed in the wake of World War I. It was mainly associated with the group Devetsil. According to Czech art historians, it had only a negligible impact on the members' approach to painting, and was instead associated with the group's architectural and typographic work, as well as stage designs, photography and kinetic sculptures (in particular the works of the highly original artist Zdeněk Pešanek, who remained active after the war).<sup>53</sup> The leading artists of the Czech avant-garde, such as Karel Teige, generally worked outside the sphere of classic Constructivism. There were no Czech artists of Stażewski's or Kassák's stature who could pass their Constructivism to the younger generation after the war. František Kupka, a Czech artist with an international reputation, spent his entire adulthood in France. In the early 1930s he was affiliated with the French group Abstraction-Création, which functioned as the main centre of European Constructivism after the fall of the Soviet avant-garde and the closure of the Bauhaus. Kupka's work, especially his experiments with Constructivism, were at the time little known in Czechoslovakia. His first retrospective took place in 1946, on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday in Prague at the Manege Gallery. The Czechoslovak authorities purchased approximately forty works from the exhibition for the state museum collection.<sup>54</sup>

The interwar period was quite unique in Czechoslovakia. As I mentioned earlier, the Communists seized power here relatively late, in 1948, through a coup. As a result, during the three post-war years, modern culture could

56. Imre Bak,  
*Blue Frame*,  
1968.  
Hungarian  
National  
Gallery,  
Budapest.

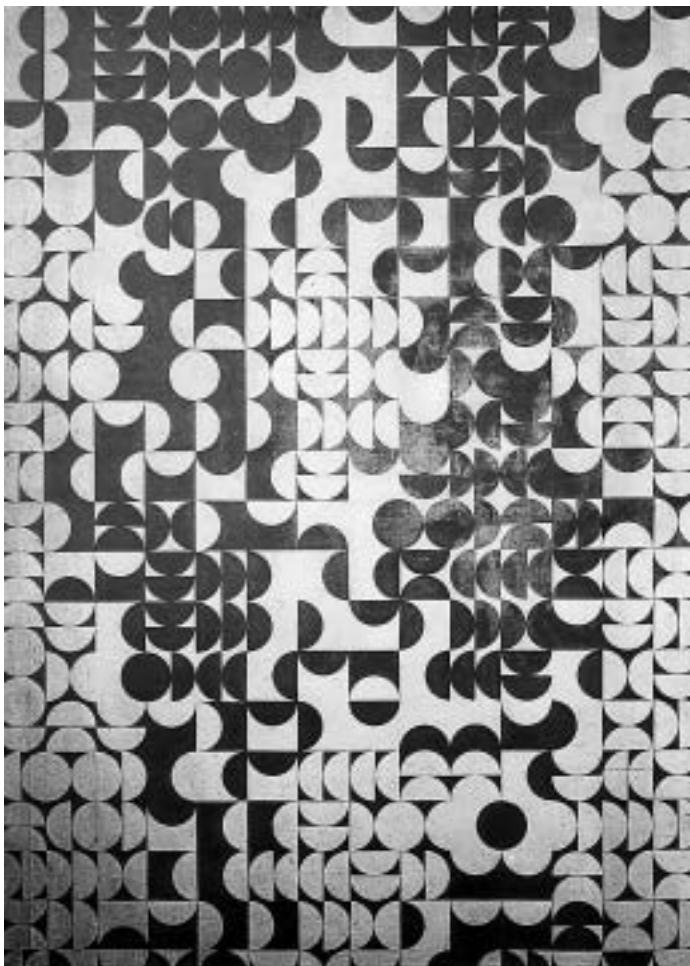
develop in Czechoslovakia much more freely than in Poland, Hungary and Romania (countries allied with Nazi Germany and occupied by the Red Army after the war), or Yugoslavia, which was just beginning to implement more liberal cultural policies. The shortness of that initial period and the focus on the Parisian art scene meant that when the possibility of a more dynamic development of culture returned in the mid-1950s, Czech artists turned their attention to *Art informel*, rather than neo-Constructivism.<sup>55</sup> In the late 1950s Constructivism functioned largely on the margins of the Czechoslovak art scene. A wider interest in the Constructivist tradition began to appear in the early 1960s, giving impetus to the development of Czech and Slovak neo-Constructivism.<sup>56</sup>

In 1963 several outstanding Czech artists, including Jiří Kolář, Karel Malich and Zdeněk Sýkora, co-founded the group Křižovatka. A year later, another group, Umelecká Besada, was formed by Václav Boštik, Stanislav Kolibal and others. In that year, 1964, Křižovatka had its first show at the famous Prague gallery of Vaclav Špála. The next stage in the development of Czech neo-Constructivism consisted of Dušan Konečny's founding of the group Synteza in 1965 and the opening of the Club of Concretists in 1967,<sup>57</sup> which was also frequented by Slovak neo-Constructivists, in particular Milan Dobeš, Alojz Klímo and Miloš Urbásek.<sup>58</sup> The club became a dynamic centre of kinetic art that drew inspiration from the post-war works of Zdeněk Pešánek, the activities of the Dviženije group and the works of a Slovak artist, Milan Dobeš.<sup>59</sup> The final statement of this phase of Czech neo-Constructivism was the exhibition *New Sensibility* (Nová Cítlivost), organized by Jiří Kolář and shown in the spring of 1968 in Brno and Karlovy Vary and in the autumn of the same year in Prague at the Manege gallery, in which neo-Constructivists played a significant role.<sup>60</sup>

The exhibition was a key event in the post-war history of Czech art, acquiring a legendary status on a par with the Hungarian *IPARTEV* or the Polish *Wrocław '70*. It functioned, just like those other events, as a major turning point. One could also find here signs of the nascent neo-avant-garde in the form of work quite close to conceptual art (for example, works of Jiří Valoch). Just like its Polish and Hungarian counterparts, *New Sensibility* was also, though in a much more dramatic way, impacted by the emerging political situation. Unlike Poland and Hungary, which were beginning to experience cultural liberalization, Czechoslovakia was entering the period of 'normalization' that began soon after the suppression of the Prague Spring, and which forced the artistic avant-garde of Bratislava, Brno and Prague into the underground.

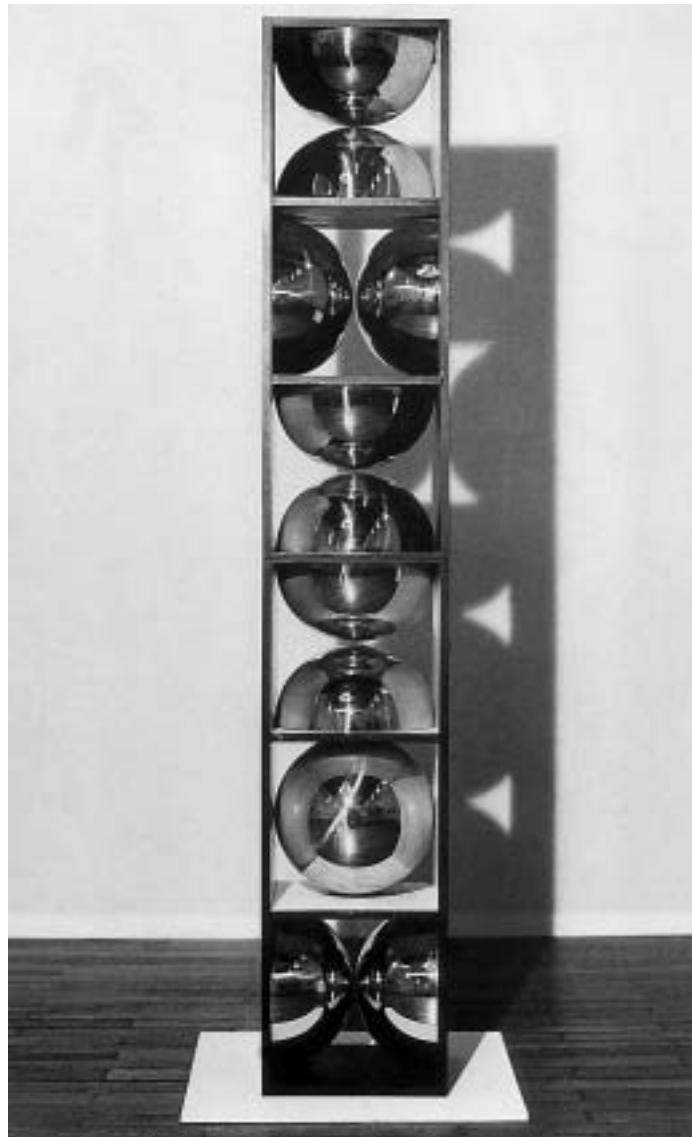
It would be difficult to systematize the full range of Czech and Slovak Constructivism. Suffice it to say that among many neo-Constructivist artists,

there were some who worked in a classic form of that style, for instance Jan Kubiček, who quite rigorously subdivided his canvases into geometric planes, Miloš Urbásek from Slovakia, or Zdeněk Sýkora (illus. 57), who relied on mathematic formulas to construct his compositions, though, from a strictly visual perspective, was perhaps not very close to classic geometric abstraction. There were also artists who worked with light, such as Hugo Demartini (illus. 58) or the Slovak kinetic sculptor Milan Dobeš (illus. 59). After experimenting with virtually classic geometric forms in the 1950s, Demartini began experimenting in the late 1960s with transgression of the traditional media boundaries, producing process-based works in which chance played a significant role in defining the final form of the piece. Those experiments consisted of throwing various 'forms' up into the air (planks and sticks, or 'planes' and 'lines') in order



57. Zdeněk  
Sýkora,  
*Red-Silver  
Structure*, 1967.  
National  
Gallery, Prague.

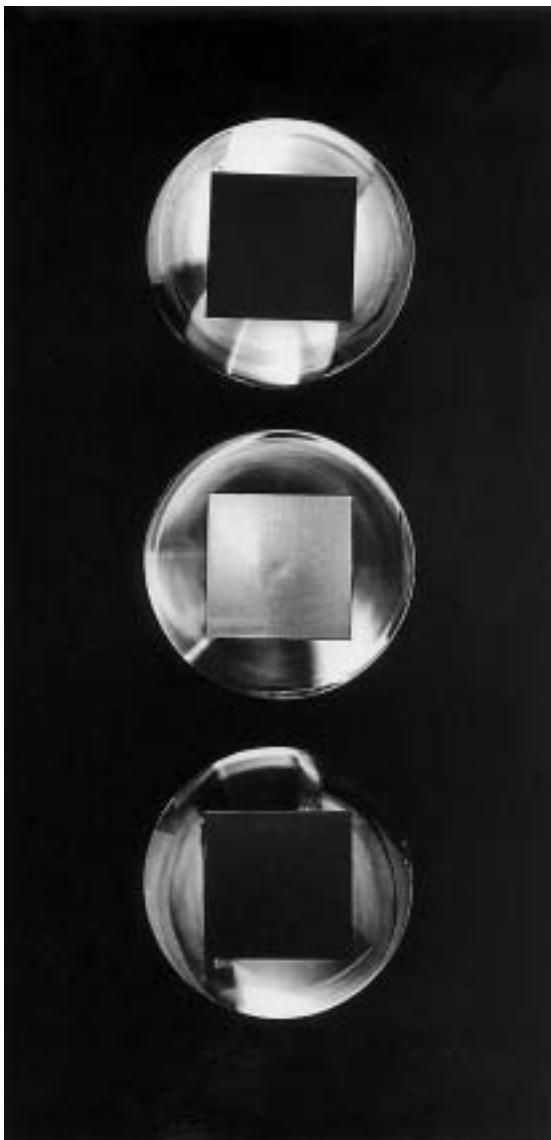
to photograph their accidental and momentary ‘composition’. Finally, one should mention artists who invoked the Constructivist tradition in a quite unorthodox manner. One of them was Stanislav Kolibal, who confronted the idea of the stability of geometrical forms (deeply rooted within the mythology of the avant-garde) with its negation through ‘breaking’, ‘melting’ and so on (illus. 60). Another interesting artist worth mentioning is Karel Malich, who experimented with the ‘sculpting’ of space by means of open forms constructed



58. Hugo  
Demartini,  
*Space Variation  
of a Convex  
Mirror*, 1967.  
Benedikt Rejt  
Gallery, Louny.

from bars, wire and plastics (illus. 61). He also produced small-scale objects that functioned as conceptual models for 'open' architecture. Those objects recalled the projects of the classic Russian avant-garde, such as Malevich's 'architekton', though they relied on a quite different, completely un-geometric aesthetic.<sup>61</sup>

One of the most original Czech artists who looked to the Constructivist tradition was Jiří Kolář. It was at his table at the famous café Slavia that the idea of *New Sensibility* was first discussed.<sup>62</sup> Kolář's liberal attitude towards



59. Milan  
Dobeš,  
*The Pulsating  
Rhythm*, 1968.  
Benedikt Rejt  
Gallery, Louny.

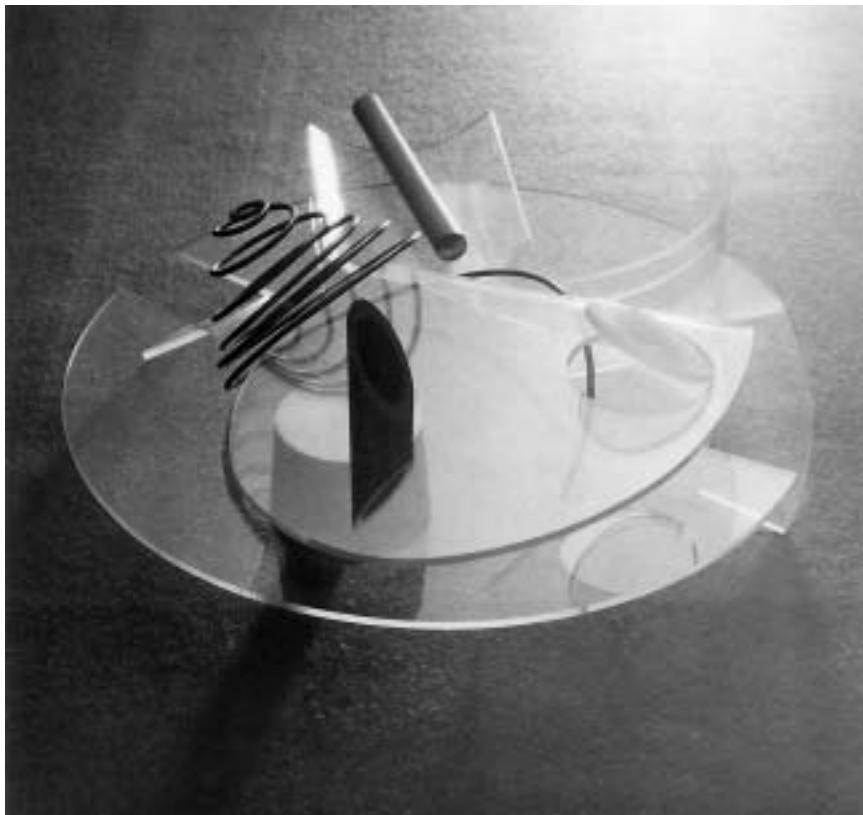
60. Stanislav  
Kolibal,  
*Disappearing  
Shape*, 1968.  
National  
Gallery, Prague.



various artistic styles left a mark on the exhibition, which likewise embraced a broad and liberal interpretation of Modernism. An essay by Jiří Padrta entitled ‘K situaci’, published in the journal *Výtvarné umění* in 1968, functioned as a kind of programme for the show. It was inspired, according to Hlaváček, by various statements made by Pierre Restany, who was at that time very popular in Czechoslovakia.<sup>63</sup> Padrta’s text described a general atmosphere of the contemporary avant-garde, rather than a specific (for instance, Constructivist) tradition. To a certain extent, Kolář’s work justified such a broad interpretation, which ranged from Restany’s new realism to neo-Constructivism. Kolář used a type of collage technique to make reproductions of various objects from ironic reconstructions of geometric forms to children’s toys (*Boat*, 1964, *Hobby Horse*, 1964). He lined them with small fragments of pages from illustrated magazines. Kolář called the resulting artworks ‘chiasmages’. For instance, in

*Homage to Larousse* (illus. 62), the artist used overlapping geometrical forms, marked as such only through breaks in the collage. The superimposition of their surfaces made it impossible to distinguish between the forms and the background. In a sense, one could see this work as an ironic allusion to Malevich's *White Square on White*. It is precisely such irony that marks the unique character of Czech culture, removed from the usual pathos of Constructivism.

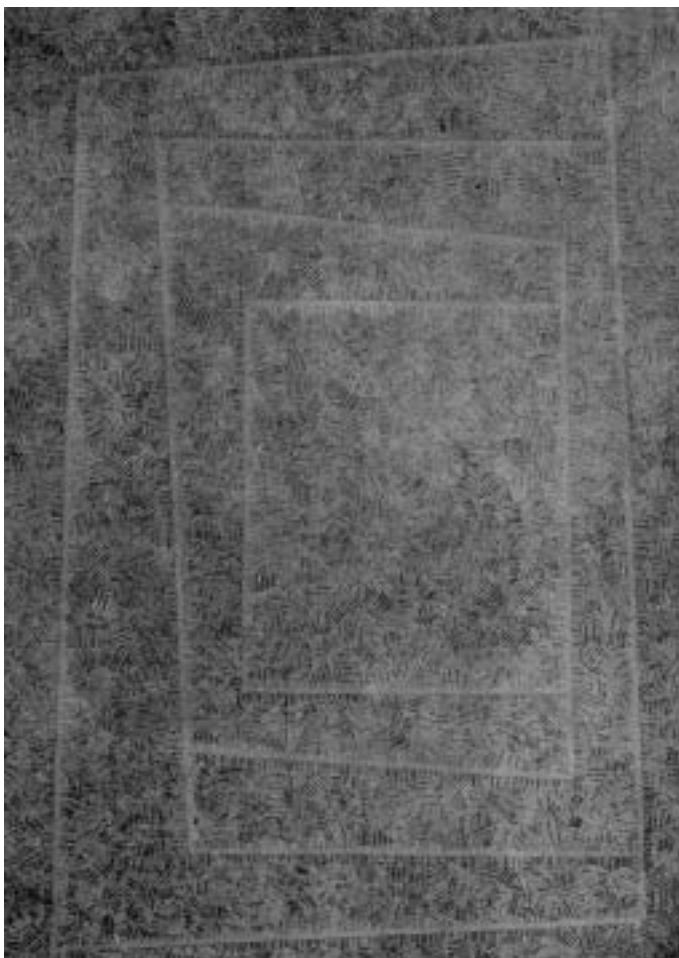
We should also mention Václav Boštik, a very different artist who also freely accessed the Constructivist legacy. His paintings, which referenced geometrical patterns, operated within a particularly refined painterly sensibility. As a result, his canvases created interesting juxtapositions between the use of geometric forms and sensitive application of colour and tone as well as attention to surface texture. This sensitive and sensual engagement with painting materials was a far cry from the conceptual and rational attitude generally assumed as the defining characteristic of Constructivism. Paradoxically, Boštik's approach was closer to the colourism of *Art informel*. One



61. Karel  
Malich, *The  
Space Object*,  
1968–9.  
Benedikt Rejt  
Gallery, Louny.

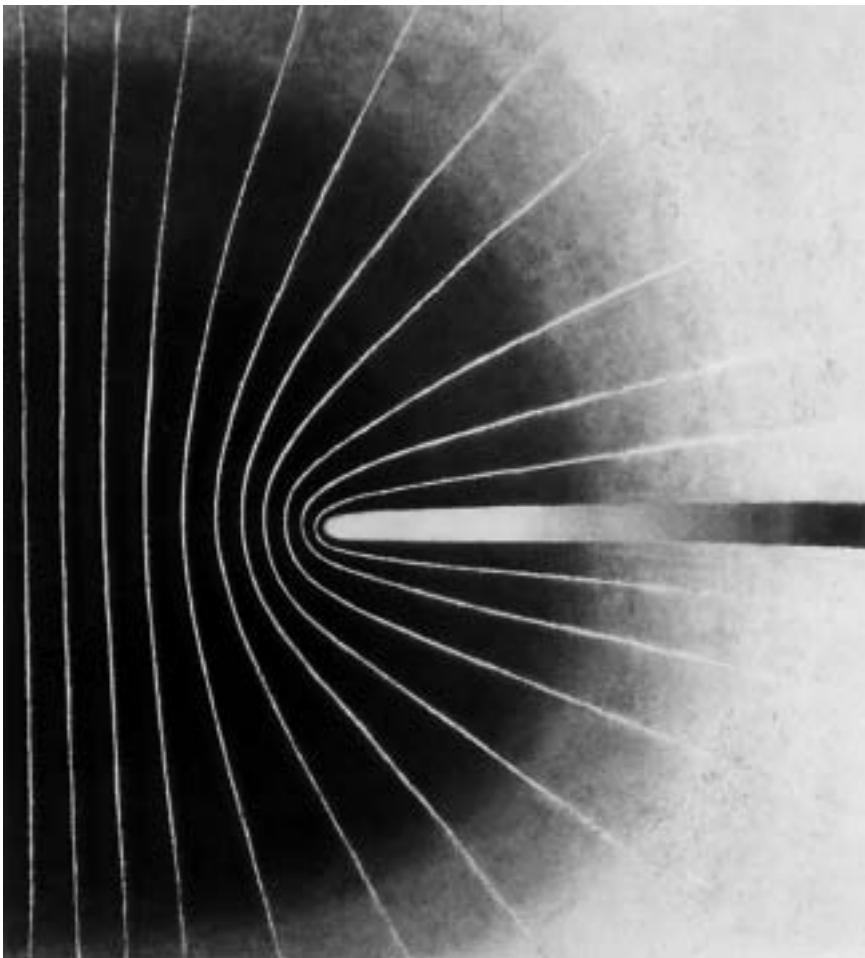
could say that the Czech artist learned the lesson of *Art informel*, paying particular attention to its sensitive handling of materials, only to combine it with a geometrical compositional approach.

Boštik was not alone. In the late 1950s and '60s, when neo-Constructivism had not yet fully crystallized as a distinct tendency within Czech art, local artists demonstrated a great deal of flexibility in their movement among different art-historic references.<sup>64</sup> This was a very different situation from the one in Poland, where Przyboś quite convincingly could call for the continuation and cultivation of the local Constructivist tradition. Nevertheless, Boštik's paintings pursued an analogous path to the one chosen by the Polish painter Stefan Gierowski, who at approximately the same time combined geometric forms with a painterly approach based on luminescence of colour and tone in



62. Jiří Kolář,  
*Homage to  
Larousse*,  
1965–6.  
courtesy Bela  
Kolářova.

63. Stefan Gierowski,  
*Painting CLV (Stroke)*, 1964.  
National Museum, Warsaw.



a highly refined and sensitive way (illus. 63). While in Hungary one could observe a certain syncretism of approaches within the *oeuvre* of a single artist, in particular Dezső Korniss, in Czech art one could see the mixing of various tendencies not just within the *oeuvre* of a single artist, but within a single artwork. By contrast, in Poland the boundaries between neo-Constructivism and other tendencies were much more precisely defined, although the example of Sosnowski and Gierowski clearly shows that there were exceptions to the general rule.

Despite marked differences among various countries, neo-Constructivism remained highly popular throughout Eastern Europe, with the exception of Bulgaria, throughout the 1950s and especially the '60s. In order to begin locating reasons that account for this situation, I would like to draw on a text by Rosalind Krauss, who analysed the status of geometrical abstraction as a

Modernist myth or, to be more precise, identified the function and significance of one of its key concepts, namely the grid. Krauss writes:

And just as the grid is a stereotype that is constantly being paradoxically rediscovered, it is, as a further paradox, a prison in which the caged artist feels at liberty. For what is striking about the grid is that while it is most effective as a badge of freedom, it is extremely restrictive in the actual exercise of freedom. Without doubt the most formulaic construction that could possibly be mapped on a plane surface, the grid is also highly inflexible. Thus just as no one could claim to have invented it, so once one is involved in deploying it, the grid is extremely difficult to use in the service of invention. And thus when we examine the careers of those artists who have been most committed to the grid, we could say that from the time they submit themselves to this structure their work virtually ceases to develop and becomes involved, instead, in repetition . . . Structurally, logically, axiomatically, the grid *can only be repeated*. And, with an act of repetition or replication as the 'original' occasion of its usage within the experience of a given artist, the extended life of the grid in the unfolding progression of his work will be one of still more repetition, as the artist engages in repeated acts of self-imitation. That so many generations of twentieth-century artists should have maneuvered themselves into this particular position of paradox.<sup>65</sup>

Krauss debunks the alleged originality of this kind of art, pointing to repetition that is virtually inevitable in any work referencing geometry. Art based on geometric forms cannot evolve; it can only repeat the same compositional schemes. Yet such art, condemned to replicate the same formulas, is accompanied, paradoxically, by the discourse of originality.

Krauss identifies another element of the Modernist discourse of geometric abstraction, namely the opacity of the Modernist painting, as a myth and a fiction. She writes,

If the Modernism's domain of pleasure is the space of auto-referentiality, this pleasure dome is erected on the semiological possibility of the pictorial sign as nonrepresentational and nontransparent, so that the signified becomes the redundant condition of a reified signifier. But from *our* perspective, the one from which we see that the signifier cannot be reified; that its objecthood, its quiddity, is only a fiction; that every signifier is itself the transparent signified of an already-given decision to carve it out as the vehicle of a sign – from *this* perspective there is no opacity, but only a transparency that opens onto a dizzying fall into a bottomless system of reduplication.<sup>66</sup>

This statement demolishes the Modernist myth of the 'purity' of geometric abstraction, which, in reality, does not produce self-referential structures or 'pure' images, but rather opens the door to a wide range of potential meanings.

Krauss constructs her argument using examples taken exclusively from Western art. It is unlikely that with the exception of classic Constructivism, especially its Soviet variant, she would be aware of the art discussed in this study. This occidental orientation determines, to a large extent, her attitude, especially since the book in which the essay appeared, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1985), was implicated in the critique of Modernism and was engaged in a polemic against Modernist art. Of course, one must not ignore Krauss's observations (and it is not my intention to do so); however, it may be worthwhile to look beyond Krauss's diagnosis of the lack of authenticity and fictiveness of the discourse accompanying neo-Constructivism. In Eastern Europe, where one can observe a much greater freedom in the use and application of avant-garde models as well as the synergetic combination of incongruous artistic trends that often produced very original results, the very different historic context opens up the possibility of a very different range of conclusions. Perhaps one could even go a step further and claim that what – according to Krauss – constitutes an inherent weakness in Western neo-Constructivism constitutes its strength in Eastern Europe. Let us then inquire into the specific meanings of that body of work found within its own geo-historic context.

Some attempts have been already made to explore this territory. Lóránd Hegyi's 1992 comparative analysis of East European neo-Constructivism in the exhibition *Reduktivismus* and its accompanying catalogue must be mentioned.<sup>67</sup> Hegyi wrote that the broad interest in neo-Constructivism in this part of Europe was a reaction against the neo-Classicism and Socialist Realism imposed by Communist regimes. That is where, according to Hegyi, one should seek the sources of reductivism and, I would add, of syncretism.<sup>68</sup> In many ways this conclusion is quite obvious. The problem rests in the relationship of neo-Constructivism to the Constructivist tradition and in its utopian character, which certainly played a role in its popularity. During the post-war period Constructivism was certainly subject to reductivism. It was largely stripped of its original (1920s) utopian ideology. As a result, the rhetoric of revolution, the new order, collectivism, rationalization of social structures and so forth disappeared from the discourse accompanying post-war neo-Constructivism.

The Communists, who compromised the dream of the Grand Utopia while using its language well into the 1950s and '60s (and occasionally even later), were, of course, largely responsible for that shift. The artists who lived in the East (the situation is rather more complicated in the West) understood perfectly well that such rhetoric functioned as a fig leaf for the totalitarian system of power, which followed the cultural policies outlined in the 1930s by such Stalinist ideologues as Andrei Zhdanov. In those circumstances, it would

have been difficult for artists drawn to Constructivism to embrace its revolutionary rhetoric, which acquired a very different meaning during the post-war period. Instead of invoking the slogans of productivism championed by Rodchenko, they embraced the mythology of the ‘blank canvas’ associated with the avant-garde tradition, referencing the utopia of the harmonious co-existence of the various elements within the non-objective world envisioned by Malevich.<sup>69</sup>

One must also keep in mind that any reference to the Russian avant-garde during the Stalinist period and shortly thereafter had a political significance. The avant-garde was seen as Stalin’s victim and political dissidents from Communist Europe (especially during the 1950s) continued to associate Constructivism with Western ‘decadence’ and formalism, rather than ‘new times’ and revolutionary optimism. Consequently, while Krauss is certainly correct in observing that the conception of a ‘blank canvas’ and self-referentiality of the work are mere fictions, she is mistaken in her analysis of the dynamics of signification. In East European neo-Constructivism, the signifier was only seemingly reified and identified with the meaningless objectivity. In fact, it carried a great deal of meaning (and was marked as such), not only, as Krauss puts it, because of the *‘decision* [my italics] to carve it out as the vehicle of a sign’, but also, and maybe above all, because of the political context within which that decision was made. In other words, that decision was a result of a conscious attitude of the artist as well as of the context that was not always consciously comprehended. Krasiński’s statement about the ‘neutrality’ of the blue line suspended in space must be read within that context. He wrote, ‘the strip is independent from everything and everyone, from the Polish Commonwealth, from Solidarity, from the lot’.<sup>70</sup> Declaring the neutrality of the line in the political sense, the Polish artist unmasked, however, the mythology of its ‘blankness’ and ‘objectivity’, admitting, by the same token, its political significance.

Thus, in the simplest terms, ‘blank canvas’ signified solidarity with the persecuted avant-garde and resistance against the cultural policies inspired by Zhdanov’s doctrines. On a more profound level, it expressed an ambition, recognized by Hegyi, to participate in the universal sphere of modern culture. Those ‘negative’ meanings may have motivated avant-garde syncretism. In this context, resistance against political instrumentalization of culture was more important than the vision of a brave new world constructed on a geometrical foundation. It did not matter which form of abstraction was chosen, as long as it was abstraction and not Socialist Realism, since any abstraction was associated with the universal European culture.

The question that remains is: to what extent did such mythologizing of geometry allow for a critical perspective? On the one hand, it is certain that it

functioned as a reaction against Communist internationalism (or the dominance of the Soviet culture) and the socialist doctrine of art. On the other, one can not ignore the fact that in some instances, in particular in those Communist countries with more liberal cultural policies, such as post-'thaw' Poland, Yugoslavia after 1948, Hungary in the 1970s or Czechoslovakia before the suppression of the Prague Spring, neo-Constructivism was not only tolerated but endorsed by the authorities. In such a context, it becomes quite significant that Stażewski's work *Unlimited Vertical Composition* was executed during the 'Wrocław '70' symposium, which was part of the 25th anniversary celebration commemorating the return to Poland of the so-called 'Western Territories', or the eastern border region of Germany annexed by Poland after World War II. Of course, the artists who organized the meeting were following a deliberate strategy; the regime was much more willing to finance avant-garde projects if they were executed as part of the official national celebrations. However, realization of such projects was also a result of the strategy adopted by the authorities, who were able to rely on avant-garde artists to provide striking graphic staging for political and ideological celebrations.

This example brings to mind the phenomenon described by Slavoj Žižek, who observed that at least some citizens of totalitarian countries took advantage of the opportunities created by the ideology. In Eastern Europe, it was quite common for individuals to cynically use ideology for private purpose and to seek opportunities created by its use for concrete, private gain. Of course, the cynical, private user of the ideology was not the sole beneficiary. In fact, the greatest winner was the ideological state, since the ideology legitimized its authority, and its use signified obedience and demonstrated existence of 'common interests'.<sup>71</sup> Thus Stażewski's work and the entire trend of neo-Constructivism could be seen as an extension of a general political strategy, paradoxically, grounded in the tradition of Constructivism and productivism, which mythologized the fusion of art and life, including the fusion of art experiments with political (back then Bolshevik) agitation.

In such a context, the work of Hermann Glöckner acquires new significance. His intimate, small-scale paintings and objects were indeed very different from Stażewski's projects realized in Wrocław, a city incorporated into Poland just 25 years earlier. This and other similar examples clearly demonstrate that in some Communist countries, especially those with more liberal cultural climates, the authorities decided that the mythology of the 'blank canvas' did not pose a threat to the socialist culture, especially since the artists themselves were committed to the fictions brought to light by Rosalind Krauss. They really believed in the reification of the signifier. Moreover, contemporary art criticism, instead of subjecting this work and belief system to a real critique,

simply perpetuated the mythology promoted by the artists. In other words, the mythology of geometric purity not only did not pose a threat to the post-Stalinist regimes, but, in fact, participated in their legitimization. It is important to keep in mind that those regimes came up with their own critical accounts of Stalinism that furthered their own interests in the wake of Khrushchev's famous 'secret speech' delivered at the twentieth congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1955. It is symptomatic that in those countries where Stalin was not criticized, such as Bulgaria and the GDR,<sup>72</sup> neo-Constructivism did not develop in a significant way. One could also say that because the political significance of neo-Constructivism was somewhat belated, it converged with the political aims of the regime, paradoxically, on the level of deeply buried structures that defined the functioning of post-Stalinist Communism.

The other element of the East European mythology of neo-Constructivism, universalism, also had a double meaning. No doubt it was an expression of opposition to the 'velvet prison' constructed by the cultural policies of the Communist regimes. Painting circles and squares, drawing grids and nets, the artists of Eastern Europe could feel that they were participating in the great worldwide avant-garde, or, to be more precise, that they functioned in the same sphere as the Western European artists. Initiatives such as the 'New Tendencies' in Zagreb and the fact that many East European artists participated along with Western artists in exhibitions, biennales, and symposia confirmed those beliefs. They were convinced that the grid would carry them over the Iron Curtain and ensure their participation in European culture, which was taken away from them by the Red Army and the KGB.

In this context, the post-war Modernist mythology of universalism functioned as a form of cultural compensation for political subjugation, regardless of the fact that the ideology of universalism was also an instrument of Western cultural foreign policy, which had a decidedly imperialist character.<sup>73</sup> The belief that art has a universal character, that it crosses the Iron Curtain and participates in the universal culture, was no more than a pleasant fiction. In reality, not only the lives of the artists but also their works were determined by the specific East European context. There is plenty of economic, institutional and cultural evidence to support this claim. Overt censorship was by no means the most sophisticated method of exercising political and administrative control over culture. The artists could only organize shows that received the approval of the authorities and the authorities sometimes, for instance in 1970 in Wrocław, derived clear visible ideological benefits from their tolerance. Moreover, the artists' participation in international expositions was restricted: the police would (or would not) issue passports, the customs allowed (or did not

allow) the works to leave the country, and, finally, the Communist officials had complete control over per diems, stipends and subsidies in hard or local currency and could release or withhold funds at will.

Likewise, on the other side of the Iron Curtain, the reception of East European art was taking place within the sphere of universal criteria. The encounter of an artist from the ‘Other’ Europe with the international art market had nothing to do with universalism of aesthetic values. It was always clear who belonged on which side. For many Western institutions the interest in the work of this or that Eastern European artist had a quasi-ethnographic character; what counted was that the artist came from ‘over there’, not that he or she operated within a sphere of ‘universal’ values. The economic and institutional framework of the international art scene left no doubt that this was the case. The ‘geographical’ differences in prices were often enormous and pointed to the existence of a real hierarchy between the Eastern and Western artists. Sometimes the discrepancies verged on being offensive; local collectors could often buy works by renowned East European artists for a hundred dollars or so, the cost of a modest supper for two. Likewise, the record of purchases made by Western museums contradicts the belief that value of art was universal and as such was unaffected by the Iron Curtain. The everyday practice of art took a toll on the vision of the universalism of artistic values, revealing it for what it was, a myth rather than a reality.

There is one more reason why one should approach the claims of universalism with suspicion. There was a considerable coincidence between the belief of artists in their participation in universal (that is, Western) culture and the strategies of the Communist regimes seeking to establish their liberal credentials with the West. In particular, this was the case in Yugoslavia, Poland and Hungary, where the efforts of the regimes to secure foreign loans and economic credits required demonstration of tactical liberalism. Within the sphere of culture, art that operated within the mythology of the ‘pure’ and, therefore, politically disengaged, painting did not pose a challenge to the principles of Communism. As such, it could be safely used as evidence of the changes taking place in the East. As a result, in those Eastern European states that rejected the Stalinist doctrine of the ‘building of Communism within one’s own country’ and opted for a greater (mostly economic) openness to the outside world, the ability to point to the existence of universally recognized artistic styles and theories was quite useful. The artists who rejected Socialist Realism (Stalinist propaganda art) in favour of neo-Constructivism (universal and Western European), did what many of the post-Stalinist regimes did when they rejected Stalinist economic policies in favour of the so-called ‘limited market economy’ and international commerce. Here it should be noted that neo-

Constructivism developed most vigorously in the countries which embraced 'liberal real socialism' and did not appear in those which experienced, at most, 'Stalinist de-Stalinization'.<sup>74</sup> Thus the critical function of geometry turned out to have been just another myth of Modernism. However, it was not the 'universal' myth described by Rosalind Krauss, but rather one determined by the specific political and historic circumstances of Eastern Europe.

# 5

## Un-Socialist Realism

During the night of 12 August 1961, in the centre of a city located at the heart of Europe, a wall was erected. On the east side, the Berlin Wall was called ‘the antifascist defensive bulwark’. It was protected by guards and watchtowers and was soon equipped with automated firing sentries. On the west side, after a brief period of anxiety caused by the sudden isolation of this created island, almost immediately mitigated by an airlift organized by a former foe, the Wall ceased to cause major concern. It became a destination visited mainly by tourists (also those from the East) and by graffiti artists. While on the east side the Wall inspired dread and signified death and lack of hope, on the west side it was seen as a grotesque sign of the division of Europe. If one climbed a platform erected on the west side and looked eastward over the Wall, motivated by a not necessarily innocent curiosity, one saw grey and expressionless streets that used to belong to the city. But this was now a different city, a different country and a different Europe.

The construction of the Wall ended the process that began on 17 June 1953. The uprising of the East German workers that took place that day was a tragic symptom of the awakening hopes that the citizens of this ‘frontier’ state would be able to lead better and freer lives after Stalin’s death. The Wall destroyed those hopes. The artists, who naturally shared those expectations, already knew that the de-Stalinization of East German culture had a decidedly Stalinist character. The conference on culture organized by the GDR’s Communist Party (SED) in Bitterfeld in 1959 left no illusion on this subject. The resolution adopted at the conference, known as ‘the Bitterfeld course’, would function as the litmus test of ‘Stalinist de-Stalinization’.<sup>1</sup>

The paradox and the peculiarity of the East German art scene was that in contrast to other East European countries, in the GDR the regime and the artists, even those who could not find a place for themselves within the official art channels, shared the same ideology. That ideology rested on two mutually

reinforcing pillars: antifascism, understood as a critical attitude towards the Nazi past, and Marxism, identified with an anti-liberal, anti-Western political attitude. This peculiar anti-capitalist consensus created a very complex relationship between the official state culture of the GDR and the unofficial alternative culture associated with the more or less independent intellectual groups.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this explains the lack of interest in East Germany in Western contemporary art, in particular *Art informel*, which was so well received in other countries in the region, especially Czechoslovakia and Poland.

Eckhart Gillen writes that the foundation of this consensus was formed by a Nietzschean tension between ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’, which informed the national worldview of Germans throughout the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> According to Gillen, Germans ‘traditionally’ sought support in ‘culture’, which they defined as their own spiritual attitude towards reality, and contrasted it with Western ‘civilization’, identified with materialism and capitalism. Ignoring the fact that similarly defined, opposing values were used by the Nazis, the GDR regime took over this rhetoric in its anti-Western, namely anti-American and anti-West German, ideological strategy. The intellectual circles, which shared this rhetoric, also identified themselves with the anti-Western phobia of the GDR regime. They created a type of anti-capitalist ‘socialist humanism’, characterized by an antagonism against Western contemporary cultural forms, including *Art informel*, associated with the new internationalism of Western civilization and ‘anti-humanism’ of the post-war Western world. The East Germans were seeking a different tradition, one associated with leftist, politically engaged art, but their historic perspective had a selective character. They endorsed the pre-war traditions of New Objectivity, Expressionism and so forth, but rejected those associated with the German avant-garde, which, of course, was also situated within the territory occupied by the political left.<sup>4</sup>

Because of this dynamic, the task of mounting a resistance to the Socialist Realist indoctrination fell in the GDR to art that relied on more or less ‘modern’ forms of figuration, to art that was more Expressionist, less constrained in its relationship to objective references, and based more in personal experience than the official propaganda art. When East Germans looked to the West, and especially to France, they did not see Hans Hartung or Wols, the German émigrés who became key figures of the Paris-based *Art informel*, but Picasso, the paradigmatic, one could even say classic, modern artist, who was politically engaged on the side of Communism.<sup>5</sup> Picasso’s political sympathies not only provided the independent art circles with an alibi for their interest in modern art, but also further demonstrated the existence of the earlier mentioned consensus.

However, if for the artists the faith in both Modernism and Socialism was a symptom of an ideological commitment and a particular attitude towards art and history, then for the regime it was mainly an outcome of their strategy based on ideological and political confrontation of their ‘front-line’ state with the Western bourgeois culture. The ongoing discussion of Picasso’s art in *Bildende Kunst* during 1955–6 demonstrates that, despite ideological consensus, the members of the independent art scene and the political authorities disagreed in fundamental ways. Although Picasso soon lost his appeal and usefulness to the regime, he remained for a long time a role model for the East German artists, exemplifying the ideal of leftist and ideologically engaged modern artist.

A month after the Berlin Wall was erected, the exhibition *Junge Künstler – Malerei* opened in East Berlin. It was the first sign of the ‘young’ German painters’ resistance to the regime.<sup>6</sup> It functioned as a confrontation, despite the fact that it did not have an ‘underground’ character and was, in fact, quite official in character. It was organized by Fritz Cremer, who came to East Berlin from Vienna, where he was a faculty member and the head of the sculpture programme at the Academy of Applied Arts. In 1961 Cremer took over the position of the chair of the Department of the Visual Arts at the Deutsche Akademie der Künste (DAK). The exhibition was Cremer’s first major public presentation of East German art after his arrival in Berlin. It immediately provoked thinly veiled criticism from the authorities, which manifested itself in various ‘discussions’ of the show in the press. Those discussions often took the form of letters of dubious authenticity supposedly written by workers to the political leadership of the GDR expressing outrage at the ‘un-socialist’ character of the art included in the exhibition.<sup>7</sup> The output of young artists working in the 1950s with Jürgen Böttcher in Dresden was particularly singled out for criticism. That group included Peter Graf, Peter Herrmann, Peter Makolies and Ralf Winkler, who later adopted the pseudonym A. R. Penck and became one of the best-known painters of the late twentieth century.

On the eve of the night the Berlin Wall was erected, Ralf Winkler/A. R. Penck returned to East Germany from West Berlin. He was visiting a friend, Georg Kern, who would later make his mark on world art history under the pseudonym Georg Baselitz. Kern/Baselitz was staying in West Berlin to study art and he was not alone. Many East German artists made efforts to attend West Berlin art schools, though the GDR authorities attempted to discourage them from doing so. Baselitz remained in the West and, together with the entire contingent of East German ‘immigrants’, which included Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter and Eugen Schönebeck, made a major contribution to the West German art scene. Penck, on the other hand, remained in East Germany until

1980, despite tremendous professional difficulties, and painted there the works that later launched his international career. He had an ambivalent attitude towards the Wall. Many years later, while living in the West, he said that he accepted the Berlin Wall as well as the anti-Western foreign policies of the GDR.<sup>8</sup> As a Marxist committed to the creation of a Socialist society, he did not question the GDR's foreign policy. Moreover, he was devoted to realism, because he believed that only this could perform the historic tasks facing the new society.

Those convictions were based on a set of values that were unlike any of those endorsed by artists of other East European countries. Not only Penck but the entire group of young artists gathered around Jürgen Böttcher in Dresden embraced quite a distinct system of artistic motivations. Instead of being interested in innovation and the creation of 'new forms', or in values associated with Modernism, they were concerned with the moral dimension of their art and the responsibility required by the historic moment.<sup>9</sup> If one assumed that those artists were representative of the East German art scene as such, then one must conclude that the situation in the GDR was indeed quite different from that found in any other Eastern Bloc country. Of course, one can find artists motivated by moral considerations elsewhere in the region. For instance, in Poland, the Warsaw *Armoury* show was held under the official twin slogans of peace and anti-fascism, though it certainly broke with the official stylistic programme of Socialist Realism. Aside from the fact that the *Armoury* show included no artists who equalled Penck in originality, the exhibition was part of the 'general mobilization' associated with the Modernist system of values and as such was perceived as an alternative to Socialist Realism. One can also observe this phenomenon in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. A somewhat different situation existed in Hungary, a point to which I will return later. However, in the GDR, due to the lack of interest in *Art informel* and only slight interest in Constructivism, compared to the other countries of the region,<sup>10</sup> Böttcher's circle, as well as other East German artists who also associated figuration with a moral dimension of artistic creativity, constituted virtually the only alternative to Socialist Realism. Their work functioned as an implicit critique of the official art doctrine, a role played in other East European countries by Modernism.

The young Dresden artists wanted to react to their environment. The work they produced in the first half of the 1950s was in full agreement with the political slogans put forth to guide the culture of the GDR, even though they did not wish to subordinate themselves to the pragmatic political directives. They wanted their art to be 'close to the people', but they also wanted their art to be their own, not the party's. The new realism and political engagement, which they found in the work of Pablo Picasso, provided the direction.

They did not look to the party for art education, but to the irascible painter Jürgen Böttcher, who served on the faculty of the Volkshochschule, established to provide art education to amateur artists. Böttcher showed them their first reproductions of twentieth-century art. He encouraged them to visit European art museums to study the works of the old masters. He also directed their attention to Picasso. His own paintings referenced Picasso, especially those works of the Spanish artist which demonstrated his moral stance against imperialism, war and violence, the values close to the official ideology of the GDR. For instance, Böttcher's painting *Lament* (1958) strongly recalls Picasso's *Massacre in Korea* (1951). It is here that one finds the most direct source of Penck's references to Picasso. Penck's *Jürgen Böttcher* of 1959 (illus. 64) recalls Picasso's *Gertrude Stein* (1906), and *Jürgen Schweinenbraden II* (illus. 65), a portrait of his friend who later opened one of the independent art galleries in East Berlin, resembles classic Cubist paintings.<sup>11</sup>



64. A. R. Penck  
(Ralf Winkler),  
*Jürgen  
Böttcher*, 1959.  
Private  
collection.

65. A. R. Penck  
(Ralf Winkler),  
Jürgen  
Schweinen-  
braden II, 1962.  
Private  
collection.



Böttcher soon left Dresden to study film in Babelsberg. He continued to paint using the pseudonym Strawalde and to be harassed by the suspicious East German authorities. His 1961 film *Drei von vielen*, about his Dresden friends, was shown in public only in 1988, a day before the Berlin Wall came down. To a certain extent the film fulfilled the official directive which urged artists to show the ‘relationship of art and life’, though it did so in a way that was far from what the authorities had in mind. It did not reflect the official optimism and was rather too close to the uncomfortable image of the difficult reality the gifted ‘art amateurs’, unwilling to compromise, had to contend with in a socialist country.<sup>12</sup> The fervent professions of Marxism by Böttcher’s

students, including Penck, did not endear them to the authorities, and may have even raised their suspicions. Penck was denied admission to the ‘professional’ art school and his application to the professional artists’ association (vbk), an organization that conferred credentials on East German artists ‘allowing’ them to work, exhibit and earn income from their art, was rejected. The reach of the regime’s power even extended to the West. Penck was excluded from an exhibition of East German art organized by the well-known art collector Peter Ludwig in Aachen in 1979 on the insistence of Willy Sitte, then president of the vbk.<sup>13</sup> Earlier, Penck’s works shown at the Dokumenta 6 held in 1977 in Kassel were completely ignored by the influential art critic Eduarda Beaucamp, whose reviews focused on ‘official’ painters. Beaucamp, even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, maintained that the work of those art officials of the state had an almost ‘subversive’ character.<sup>14</sup>

However, A. R. Penck’s work did travel beyond the borders of the GDR and attracted attention among those over whom the East German regime had no sway. His decision to use a pseudonym was meant to confuse the ever-watchful East German bureaucrats. Of course, the pseudonym has a symbolic significance. It referred to a German explorer of glaciers, Albrecht Penck (1858–1945), who was active at the turn of the nineteenth century, and as such, by analogy, drew attention to the ‘glacial’ atmosphere of the GDR. The addition of an ‘r’ left a trace of the artist’s real name, Ralf. Penck’s paintings began finding their way to the West at the end of the 1960s, to a large extend through the Gallery Hake in Cologne run by Michael Werner. Jörg Immendorff, a West German painter with leftist sympathies, also played a significant role in bringing Penck to the attention of the Western audiences. In 1977 Immendorff organized in Cologne a joint exhibition of their works, which succeeded in breaching the Wall despite the fact that Penck’s canvases had to be smuggled out of the GDR.<sup>15</sup>

Those were, however, the last years of Penck’s residence on the east side of the Berlin Wall. He left in 1980. One could say that he left because he could no longer stay; his faith in the ideology was undermined. Even earlier, when still a member of a Dresden-based underground group ‘Die Lücke’ (1971–6) (Penck founded the group), which made references to the early twentieth-century Expressionism of another Dresden-based collective, ‘Die Brücke’, he wrote:

A new life is developing in the West, though far from advertisements and my own imaginings . . . A new man is born not in the East, but in the West . . . The West was for us the synonym of evil . . . In our arrogance, we considered ourselves stronger, more determined, following the right path to art, in contrast to those in the West who were influenced by decadent ideas . . . In reality we were simply cut off.<sup>16</sup>

Let us return to 1961, the year when the Berlin Wall was erected and Fritz Cremer – a month later – organized the controversial exhibition *Junge Künstler – Malerei*. Penck exhibited two works in the show, a portrait and a self-portrait. The same year, working in the shadow of the Wall and his own ambivalence towards it, he painted another canvas which defined his original stylistic approach, *World View I* (illus. 66). This painting and other works that followed formed a series of the so-called *Systembilder*, which Penck considered to be realistic in character. However, this realism was conceived in an entirely different way from how realism was understood by the GDR cultural authorities or, for that matter, by other, ‘alternative’ East German painters. Penck wrote, ‘Since others around me were painting flowers, this was for me realism . . . It was a modern, current history painting. A world seen as a system of related attitudes.’<sup>17</sup>

There are two versions of the *World View*. The canvas created in 1961 and its companion *World View II*, also known as *Great World View*, painted in 1965 (illus. 67). Each work is both ‘historic’ and ‘modern’ in accordance with Penck’s declaration. There are also differences between the two canvases. The first was an immediate reaction to the Berlin Wall. It represents a group of silhouetted figures (one of the most characteristic features of Penck’s style) located on a small piece of land that is being consumed by flames. The sil-



66. A. R. Penck  
(Ralf Winkler),  
*World View I*,  
1961.



houetted male and female figures hold various weapons: swords, guns, missiles and so forth. The second work is much more dynamic. The figures' gestures are more animated, the overall composition suggests not just a piece of land, but the entire globe suspended in space, and in the bottom right-hand corner one can see the small but lively figure of Ralf, which functions as a autobiographic element.

Both paintings deal with the same subject – the division of the world into antagonistic sectors and the possibility of their confrontation. They are both history paintings making references to the Cold War and the partition of the continent, as well as the dangers implicit in such an armed confrontation. Penck does not question this division; he only notes, represents, and analyses it with the cool detachment of a scientist. The power of those paintings is underscored by the stylistic approach, almost equally ‘scientific’ and ‘objective’, operating with a simple and clear alphabet.<sup>18</sup> Without a doubt, Penck’s visual language suggests the inadequacy of traditionally understood realism and the need for a more ‘cool’ and ‘objective’ representational system that is capable of relating the historic situation. The works are, therefore, also ‘modern’. However, they do not experiment with the means of expression for the sake of mere experimentation, but for the sake of expressing contemporaneity in its most universal form.

67. A.R. Penck  
(Ralf Winkler),  
*World View II –  
The Great  
World View*,  
1965. Museum  
Ludwig,  
Cologne.

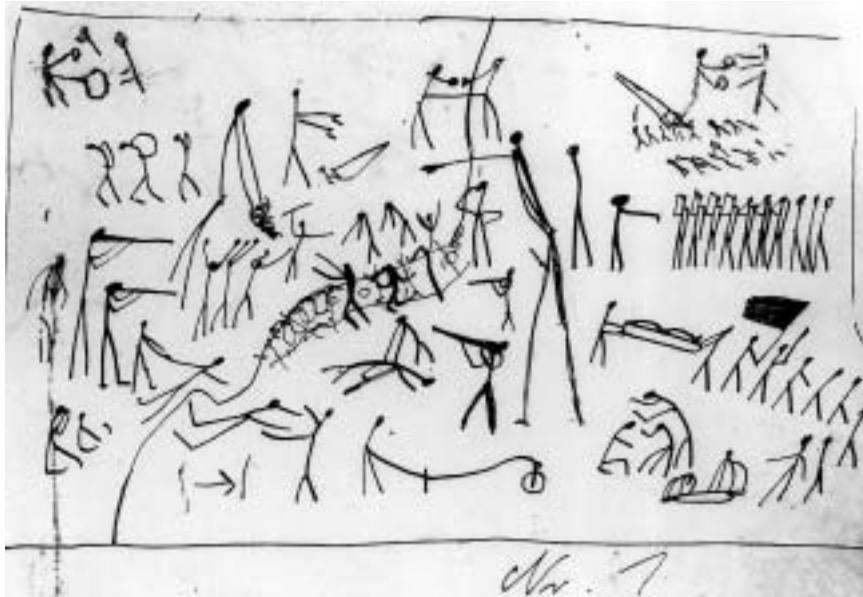
One could say that both *World View I* and *World View II* draw the viewer's attention to the generalized surface. They reconstruct the structure of the world but do not attempt to engage in it, despite the fact that the second version is much more dynamic. Even the inclusion of the 'personal' does not undermine the 'objective' character of the representation. In another pair of works, *Crossing* of 1963 (illus. 68) and *Crossing at Night* (1966), one can see a more humanist, less 'detached' attitude towards the world. In both instances, a silhouetted protagonist attempts to cross a burning plank. In the first version, the man appears to ignore the flames and maintains control over the situation; in the second, the attempt ends in tragedy. The detached observation gives way to emotional engagement. Penck's lost wall mural, *Divided Germany*, from 1962 (only the preparatory drawing survives: illus. 69) is even more dramatic and constitutes a diametrically opposed approach from that adopted by the artist in *World View*. Here the danger observed in the *World View* paintings is transformed into a confrontation; he portrays an actual struggle between two groups separated by a wall.

In Hungary, the situation was somewhat similar to that in the GDR, in so far as the alternative to Socialist Realism was also provided by figurative artists. However, the motivation, provenance and character of Hungarian figurative work were quite distinct. In many ways, the cultural policies in effect in



68. A. R. Penck  
(Ralf Winkler),  
*Crossing*, 1963.  
Neue Galerie –  
Ludwig  
Sammlung,  
Aachen.

69. A. R. Penck  
(Ralf Winkler),  
Divided  
Germany, 1962.  
Private  
collection.



Hungary at this time resembled those adopted by the East German regime. After the Budapest Uprising of 1956, the local culture was subjected to Stalinist control. The authorities allowed only one exhibition of modern art, the 1957 *Spring Exhibition*, which took place in Budapest. After the uprising, the Hungarians found themselves on the 'other' side of the wall. They were subjected to tremendous repressions and persecutions. Some were even executed. Hungarian culture was 'developing' during this period in complete isolation not only from the West but also from the 'thaw' processes taking place in the other socialist countries, including the USSR. Although there was no physical barrier, the wall created by the political blockade was comparable in its effect to the Berlin Wall and similar in character to the barricade that surrounded Czechoslovakia after 1968. But, in the first half of the 1960s, when the Berlin Wall was still under construction, there were signs of hope in Budapest. They were a consequence of completely different aspirations. The East German artists, or at least the Dresden painters associated with Böttcher's group, did not wish to be seen as innovators, to inscribe themselves into the value system of Modernism, or to borrow from the culture of the West located beyond the 'anti-fascist defensive bulwark'. In contrast, Hungarian artists wanted to be modern, to inscribe themselves into the value system of Modernism, and to get in touch with the world, or the Western contemporary art scene.

Those were the same objectives that motivated Polish and Czech artists to explore *Art informel* in the late 1950s. However, when the political situation

finally began to improve in Hungary after years of repression and greater openness allowed for greater freedom of expression, the world art scene had changed. By the mid-1960s in Western Europe and the United States contemporary art was embracing tendencies that were seen as reactions against *Art informel* and abstract Expressionism: neo-Dada, assemblage, new realism, happening, *arte povera* and so forth. Moreover, in the post-war competition between Europe and the United States, the latter had made significant strides. In 1964 the Grand Prix at the Venice Biennale was awarded to Robert Rauschenberg, the first American artist ever to win the prize. The award was a sign of significant changes and of the growing popularity of Anglo-American Pop art. This is also the moment when Hungarian artists were able once again to scrutinize Western art. They found there not only antagonisms between different trends, such as *Art informel* and Pop, but also a peculiar form of a synthesis – their co-existence.<sup>19</sup> In particular this can be said about such artists as Endre Tót, discussed in the earlier chapter, who created his *Art informel* paintings by pasting fragments of photographs, newspapers, texts, and elements borrowed from the everyday reality, and thereby invoked the sensibility of Pop art.

The general fascination with American Pop art and the possibility of seeing it at first hand had a significant impact on the Hungarian art scene. László Lakner saw Rauschenberg's works in Venice in 1964. György Jovánovics and Gyula Konkoly went to see the European exhibition of American Pop art



70. Tibor Csernus, *Lehel Square Market*, 1962. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest.

in Vienna.<sup>20</sup> But the Hungarian art historians also stress the existence of a local tradition of the so-called ‘surnaturalism’ identified mainly with Tibor Csernus, which prepared the ground for the positive reception of Pop art.<sup>21</sup> Although Csernus’s work did not resemble Pop art either on the formal or conceptual level, it did explore the problem of the relationship between figuration and reality. His paintings are perhaps closer to Surrealism, with which the artist is likely to have come in contact during his first visit to Paris in 1957–8. For instance, his painting *Lehel Square Market* (illus. 70) consists of elements such as a piece of meat, scales, grain and spice containers and vegetables, all tightly packed into their own autonomous spaces.

A painting by Sándora Altanjai, another artist considered by László Beke to be a precursor of Hungarian Pop art, *Let Me Sink Upwards* (illus. 71) is not only much closer to Western Pop art, but also clearly references the style, though certainly within a precisely defined local context. The painting is about Miklós Erdély, one of the leading artists of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, a multi-faceted individual who often made references to his Jewish roots.<sup>22</sup> Erdély is portrayed as a figure without a face, with sidelocks and long beard, wearing a



71. Sándor Altanjai, *Let Me Sink Upwards (Person Waving his Hand)*, 1967. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest.

hat and coat splattered with paint. When it was originally exhibited, the painting was perceived, according to younger Hungarian art historians, as a form of provocation, insofar as it invoked the taboo Eastern European iconography of a 'poor Jew' and included collaged bills and a copy of the artist's identity papers.<sup>23</sup> However, the scandal caused by the painting's exhibition (or rather an attempt to exhibit it) had a localized rather than a more general origin. According to Beke, who organized Altorja's exhibition in 1971, the painting was not allowed to be shown because the painting's iconography was too close to the religious iconography of the Catholic Holly Week, which had just begun. Since the painting was too large to be removed, it was covered by a curtain, which, of course, generated even more interest.<sup>24</sup> According to Beke, Altorja's work functions as a paradigmatic statement within the context of Hungarian Pop art, even though it is linked to surnaturalism. One can see this in the montage technique used by the artists. On the right-hand side of the canvas the artist pasted a series of small photographs and on the left-hand side he added a real object, an overcoat.

Clearly Altorja's and Csernus's works are quite different. This suggests, therefore, that the definition of surnaturalism is rather imprecise. Csernus's



72. László Lakner,  
*Rembrandt Study*, 1966.  
Hungarian National  
Gallery,  
Budapest.



73. Gyula Konkoly, *La Maison des anges*, 1966.

canvases reflect a more or less traditional Surrealist representational strategy of ‘unnatural’ congesting of ‘naturally’ occurring objects. As Beke himself has noted, Altorja’s work, on the other hand, closely resembles Rauschenberg’s combines through application of press clippings and real objects.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, László Lakner’s *Rembrandt Study* (illus. 72) is generally considered to be an unproblematic, full manifestation of Hungarian Pop art. The painting consists of an image of Rembrandt, combined with fragments of text as well as paint marks and stains, all typical elements of Rauschenberg’s work. Moreover, as observed by Katalin Keserü, Lakner also references Larry Rivers’s *Dutch Masters and Cigars* (1963), in which Rembrandt’s painting is identified with a brand of cigars, thus provoking associations with consumer culture and advertisements for tobacco products.<sup>26</sup> Such references to consumer culture, the popular iconosphere of mass culture, can also be found in the works of other Hungarian Pop artists. The works of Gyula Konkoly, such as *La Maison des anges* (illus. 73), are some of the most characteristic manifestations of this theme.

However, one of the most striking Hungarian artists whose work, according to Keserü, also belongs within Pop art’s sphere of influence was (and still is) György Jovánovics. Discussing one of the artist’s best known sculptures, *Man* (illus. 74), Keserü argues that the artist’s decision to paint the exposed portions of the figure’s body with regular and mechanical pattern of the

Bourbon fleur-de-lys is similar to Pop art's strategy of standardizing the image. This thesis appears to be supported by the artist's game-like equivocation between the values of traditional sculpture and the representation of mundane reality. The material used by Jovánovics, namely plaster, also supports this argument. Another work by Jovánovics from approximately the same period, *Detail from Great Gilles* (illus. 75), references Watteau's *Gilles* (1718–19), a well-known figure from Old Master paintings. The work, which consists of a plaster cast of Gilles' clothing, is also interpreted by Keserü in a similar vein. In this instance, as in the case of Lakner's work, the cited tradition is treated as a 'ready-made'.<sup>27</sup> Marta Kovalovszky has noted the link between Jovánovics's use of plaster and the work of Georg Segal, though without claiming that Jovánovics belongs within the sphere of Pop art.<sup>28</sup> I tend to agree. Jovánovics's work had a very different genesis and meanings than the Pop art system of values. The artist chose a path unlike that adopted by other Pop artists



74. György Jovánovics, *Man*, 1968. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest.

(including the Hungarian ones), which led to the exploration of mass culture and its stylistic and representational conventions. His art also had distinct philosophic and aesthetic points of reference. Ignoring the diversity of his production for a moment, one could make a general observation, that Jovánovics was interested in the problematic of existence, or more precisely of 'non-existence', a fact that is mentioned by Kovalovszky.<sup>29</sup> The plaster's neutrality, combined with its ability to conform to the figure, especially the costume of Great Gilles, suggests this hypothesis. Here the clothing does not cover the body, but its absence, a negative space. The schematic arrangement of the aforementioned sculpture *Man* also support this reading. It is also worth noting Jovánovics's treatment of the drapery in both works. The wrinkling and twisting of the material bear no relation to the anatomy of the body, as would be the case in a traditional representation of drapery. This drapery, or rather its impression, would soon play a key role in Jovánovics's work. Soon the artist



75. György Jovánovics,  
*Detail from Great Gilles*,  
1967. City Gallery,  
Budapest.

began making works consisting of plaster impressions of fabric, which became a significant motif in his work and an element of his signature style. The resulting reliefs, which constituted the main body of the artist's work, demonstrated the impermeability of the shell-surface which concealed the 'Being/non-Being' and which, in its self-sufficiency, separated us from the unknowable interior. The textured surface of the reliefs soon transformed into the walls of trunks and containers, objects whose natural function is to hold and to keep safe the content from external influence. In this context, the experience of the surface becomes the only possible visual and tactile experience of existence, of Being and non-Being, of substance and emptiness.

Erzsébet Schaár dealt in her work with similar existential problems. Schaár's sculptures were created out of sculptural body parts, faces, often hands, and schematic, flattened torsos made from boards. The artist took this approach in her 1968 work *Before and Behind the Wall* (illus. 76). A year before her death, Schaár created a much more complex installation, *The Street* (1974), for the Gallery Csók in Székesfehérvár.<sup>30</sup> *The Street* included Schaár's characteristic figures inserted into windows and interiors. According to Hungarian art historians, the work made references to the dramatic last moments of Pompeii. However, the figures referenced specific individuals from Hungarian cultural history, whose faces, frozen into masks, expressed the drama experienced in the moment of a passage from life to death. The effect was enhanced by a schematic portrayal of the body itself and of the interiors of rooms into which the figures were inserted.<sup>31</sup> The existential meaning of this work created through such contrasts focused the viewer's attention on the face, the part of the body through which some believe one can see the interior of a human being, the fullest expression of his or her existence.

Returning however to Hungarian Pop art, one could say that it took on an oppositional function vis-à-vis Socialist art. Pop was certainly perceived in those terms by both its advocates and opponents. According to Keserü, this was the character of discussions and polemics which surrounded the tendency, including the most heated and visible exchange between art historian Géza Perneczky and Imre Patkó, as well as statements made by Miklós Erdély, one of the leading figures of the Hungarian art scene.<sup>32</sup> In order to stress the alternative character of Pop art, Keserü described it as 'a negation of ideology',<sup>33</sup> understood, of course, as a negation of a particular ideology: Communism. However, the 'negative' manifestation of ideology is not synonymous with complete lack of ideological investment. Under the conditions of totalitarianism, it is impossible to find a neutral location, to behave in a neutral manner or to adopt a neutral attitude. Within that system everything has an ideological character, which may be sometimes very arbitrarily defined, but nonetheless

76. Erzsébet Schaár, *Before and Behind the Wall*, 1968.  
István Király Múzeum,  
Székesfehérvár.



does not allow for existence of anything outside the system. And, of course, ideology can be defined using negative or positive values.

This valorization was practised by both sides: the regime and the part of the society which identified itself with opposition and was sometimes referred to in Hungary as 'the second audience'. The first group perceived negatively those things which the second group saw in a positive light. This could be also said about the reception of Pop art. Because of the general lack of interest in *Art informel* in Hungary, Pop art took over the emancipatory function of the

avant-garde. It gave the Hungarian artists an opportunity to escape on the one hand the burden of the culturally conservative tradition associated with the European School, which looked to early twentieth-century Modernism for models, and on the other, the official doctrine of Socialist Realism.

Although Pop art was one of the first signs of the modernization of the Hungarian art scene, its meaning and status, just like that of *Art informel* in Poland or neo-Constructivism in Yugoslavia, soon acquired a great deal of ambivalence. Pop art in its original Anglo-American version was supposed to provide an ironic or critical commentary on consumer culture and function as its analysis, but never issued a challenge to the society of the spectacle. In Hungary there was no consumer culture in the Western sense. The local artists who reached for models provided by Pop art expressed, above all, a longing for modernity and a desire to participate in global contemporary art. But they also articulated a certain nostalgia for consumer culture, within which an empty can of Coca-Cola is just a piece of trash and not a mythologized keepsake of past trips abroad. ‘Authentic’ Coca-Cola, which could be purchased in Communist countries only with foreign currency, was accessible only to the privileged few; it was not a widely available consumer product.

Hungarian Pop art expressed a desire for consumer culture rather than presenting an analysis of its iconography and methods of representation. But despite their resistance to cultural modernity, that is Pop art, the Hungarian party officials, led by Janos Kadar, implemented policies that slowly but surely created a Socialist consumer culture, later nicknamed ‘goulash Communism’. Paradoxically, the Pop artists and their opponents expressed similar desires; the artists were anticipating ‘goulash Communism’ by linking Marxist-Leninist values with social and economic elements of consumer culture. It is worth citing here a very interesting discussion of Hungarian Pop art by Attila Horányi and Katalin Timár, which suggests a completely different interpretive approach to the subject.<sup>34</sup> The authors observed that the similarities between Hungarian and American Pop art are limited to art techniques and visual strategies. The theme and the autonomy of the artwork fundamentally differentiate those two phenomena. Moreover, the authors argued that the reliance within Hungarian art history on Western stylistic categories could be seen as a tool of self-colonization. I completely agree. However, as telling as such deconstruction of the local art historiography may be, it is difficult to ignore the fact that Hungarian artists not only looked to Western Pop art and consciously adopted its forms in order to participate in the contemporary art scene, but also openly expressed a desire for such ‘colonization’. One could say then, that this colonization was requested by the Eastern Europeans; it was desired by them because it offered a counterbalance to the political colonization imposed by the

Soviet troops and commissars. A desire for easy access to consumer products available in the West, which functioned as a point of reference for Pop art, could also be seen as a symptom of this premeditated self-colonizing strategy. One could introduce a note of irony into this commentary by asking whether the methodological tools used by the Hungarian authors, tools based in postmodern, mainly American, critical theory, could also be seen as instruments of intellectual 'self-colonization'? Is their use not motivated by the same desire for participation in the worldwide intellectual debate that motivated the Hungarian artists of the 1960s, and for the ability to speak in the same language that is spoken in the Western world?

One can find similar tendencies in Czechoslovakia, though on a somewhat smaller scale. Here Alex Mlynářík used ready-made figures: mannequins



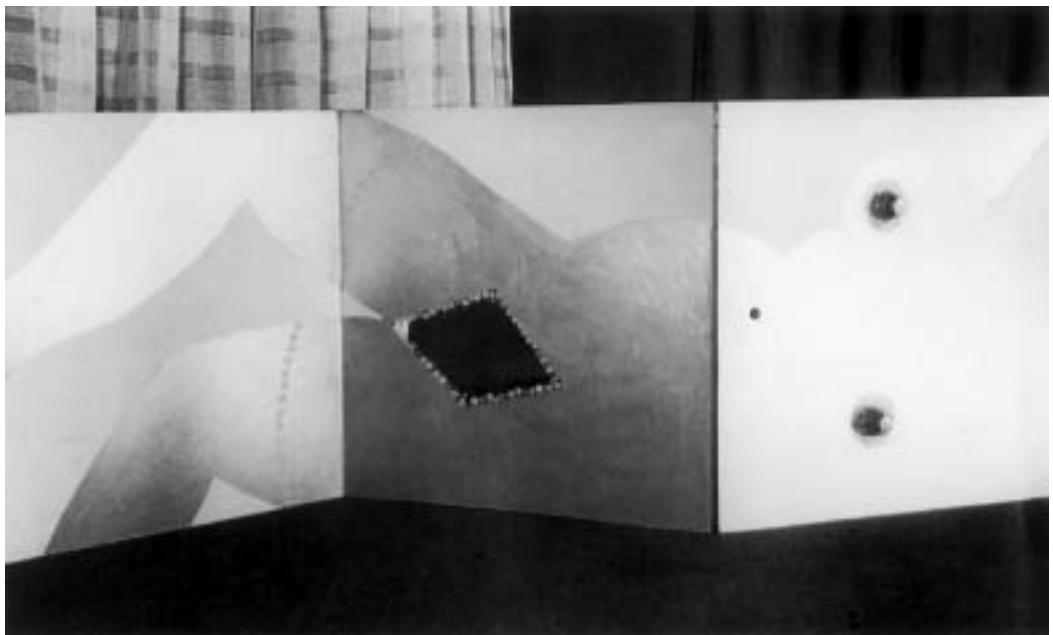
77. Alex  
Mlynářík  
*Temptation*,  
1967.

from clothing store displays or standardized representations of female models wearing fashionable undergarments (illus. 77). Writing in 1966 about Mlynářčík's work, Pierre Restany suggested that those forms should be viewed as references to pre-existing visual schemes commonly used throughout consumer culture, a type of 'commercial folklore'.<sup>35</sup> However, one must remember that this form of 'folklore' was only slightly developed in Czechoslovakia. Mlynářčík's works were in this context also an expression of nostalgia for consumer civilization and not its critique. Because in Czechoslovakia the artists could function in an atmosphere of relative freedom until the mid-1960s, the development of local art had a more 'natural' trajectory. That is why figurative art, or unsocialist realist figuration, existed here in tension with socialist figuration but also, and perhaps to the greatest degree, in tension with Modernism.

In the countries of Eastern Europe, such as Poland or Yugoslavia, but also Czechoslovakia, the rejection of Modernism combined with a turn towards figuration, which took place in the 1960s, has been given the name of 'new figuration'.<sup>36</sup> Another term, 'refiguration', was also introduced by Marian Váross in the mid-1960s in reference to Slovak art.<sup>37</sup> It described a peculiar return to figuration within abstraction, a suggestion of figurative associations within essentially abstract forms. Zora Rusinová noted this tendency in the work of several Slovak artists active in the 1960s: Viera Kraicová, Rudolf Krivoš, Milan Paštéka and others.<sup>38</sup> One of the models for this type of art was provided by Jean Dubuffet. But in general, the conception of 'new figuration' encompassed a somewhat different set of practices, namely those referencing figuration in a tension with Modernism, rather than through essentially Modernist abstract forms.

The phenomenon of 'new figuration' became a subject of considerable art critical and art-historic attention. However, the range of practices that have been gathered under this label has been so broad that achievement of terminological precision has been, as in the other cases of East European art-historical movements and styles, virtually impossible. Making matters worse is the fact that the term Pop art has also been used to describe this work, even in reference to Slovak art.<sup>39</sup> For instance, Grzegorz Dziamski, Polish scholar and observer of Slovak culture, noted on one occasion that one of the main themes of Slovak Pop art is eroticism.<sup>40</sup> Especially, he mentioned in this context a very interesting Slovak artist, Jana Želibska, in particular her decidedly erotic exhibition *The Possibility of Discovery* (illus. 78), described by Zora Rusinová.<sup>41</sup>

The 1960s Czechoslovak art scene produced a unique form of new figuration. It was unique because it combined the characteristics one could observe in Hungarian art (references to Pop art, but ones that were perhaps not as direct, located more in the sphere of declarations rather than concrete



78. Jana Želibská, *The Possibility of Discovery*, 1967.

borrowings from Anglo-American models) with those found in Poland and Yugoslavia, which were linked to ethically based conviction about art and art's engagement in the surrounding, everyday reality. One of the most interesting features of Czechoslovak art was the influence much greater than elsewhere in Eastern Europe of the French *nouveaux réalistes*, including the theorist and curator of the movement, Pierre Restany, who maintained very close contacts with Prague and Bratislava.<sup>42</sup> It is also important to keep in mind that in the 1960s Czechoslovakia found itself in a very special historic moment. The forces of the post-Stalinist 'thaw' were finally gaining momentum leading to the Prague Spring. Here, as in other Communist countries, culture played a very significant role. It became the engine of political processes. But it also became the victim of the repressions that characterized the so-called 'period of normalization' that followed the suppression of the Prague Spring. Czechoslovakia entered the period of a political 'thaw' in the early 1960s, much sooner than either the GDR or even Hungary. During this period, the Iron Curtain opened much wider in Czechoslovakia than elsewhere since the 1950s. Czechoslovak artists were able to travel abroad. Czechs and Slovaks visited the same exhibitions as the Hungarians; they saw the same art and met the same artists. In both countries the exhibition of Rauschenberg, the winner of the 1964 Venice Biennale, played an enormous role. They went to see the exhibition of Pop art in Vienna. Some even travelled to the United States; Jiří Balcar did so

in 1964. The outcome of those travels and this research was the exhibition *Object*, organized in 1965 at Václav Špála Gallery in Prague, which featured works influenced by Pop art, assemblage and new realism.

However, Czechoslovak artists did not limit their explorations. Their sphere of interests was remarkably expansive. The group of foreign artists and critics who demonstrated interest in Czechoslovakia was similarly broad. The isolation of Czechoslovakia within the international cultural arena had come to an end and with it began a period of remarkable development, the most dynamic since the end of World War II. This was also the period when figuration gained popularity within world contemporary art, or at least became much more popular than it was a decade earlier. Associated with modernity and artistic contemporaneity, figuration found fertile ground in Czechoslovakia, where it led to the development of new figuration.

In 1966 Czechoslovakia hosted the AICA (International Association of Art Critics). On that occasion an exhibition of works by young Czechoslovak artists was organized in Brno. The works of both Czech and Slovak artists were shown to the world's art critics. In the same year, Gérard Gassiot-Talabot organized a Czech version of his Parisian exhibition 'Narrative Figuration in Contemporary Art', which also made references to the *Ordinary Mythologies* (*Mythologies quotidiennes*) show held in Paris in 1964. Those events had a significant impact on Czechoslovak art. They shaped the evolving new figuration together with the influences of Pop art and new realism promoted by Pierre Restany. A certain closing of this chapter in Czechoslovak art history was provided by the exhibition *New Figuration*, which opened in the autumn of 1969 in the Prague Manesh Gallery.<sup>43</sup>

Czechoslovak new figuration was not a stylistically homogenous phenomenon. It consisted of contributions made by many distinct individuals. Among them were Jozef Janković, who created deformed yet quite colourful figures composed from body fragments and objects, and Jiří Balcar, already known as an *Art informel* painter, who, after his return from the United States, began creating works consisting of schematic outline of figures and objects placed against highly textured, painterly backgrounds based on his earlier *Art informel* work. Another artist associated with Czech new figuration was Rudolf Němec, whose figures seemed to be produced by mechanical means, yet, despite their coolness and detachment, emanated a mysterious expression. Jiří Načeradský also created similarly 'cool' paintings through the use of colour schemes and photo-realistic rendering of figures, though his naked 'runners' were much more dynamic and created an impression of animated photographs. Jiří Sopko pursued a very different approach in his paintings. He used expressive rendering based on high colour contrast and dynamic portrayal

of figures enhanced by gestural application of paint. The qualities of those works, such as the sketch-like approach and looser handling of the figures, gave Sopko's art a unique character far removed from the moralizing pathos frequently found in the 1960s new figuration (illus. 79). The sculptures of Karel Nepraš were also devoid of such pathos. His works reveal a far-reaching ironic attitude towards Modernist fascination with materials such as wire, pipes, gears and other types of metals. If the Modernists used those materials to construct solemn abstract sculptures situated within the discourse of progress and modernity, Nepraš used them casually in order to create constructions consisting of narrative scenes populated with vividly coloured, 'assembled' metal figures (illus. 80).



79. Jiří Sopko,  
*Green Runner*,  
1967.

80. Karel Nepraš, *Dialog*, 1965. National Gallery, Prague.



The various stylistic tendencies assembled under the term new figuration appeared also in Poland and Yugoslavia. Here too they were intrinsically connected to political events, though in rather different ways than in Hungary, East Germany or Czechoslovakia. Their point of reference was not Socialist Realism, since Socialist Realism was not synonymous here with 'official' art as it was in the GDR or Hungary. Rather, their critique was directed against the dominance of Modernism. The turn to figuration could not be described in this context as unSocialist Realism, but rather as un-Modernist realism. Moreover, if in East Germany or Hungary the decision to pursue figuration was motivated by a desire to 'modernize' the local contemporary art scene, in Yugoslavia and Poland it was motivated by a contrary impuls to negate modern culture. For those reasons Polish and Yugoslav variants of new figuration will not be discussed in this chapter.

In the countries under consideration here, new figuration developed primarily as a form of negation of Socialist Realism. Its appearance appears to contradict a thesis advanced by Benjamin Buchloh, that the return to figuration is always linked with the growth of authoritarian tendencies in politics and

conventional figurative representation signals elimination of art's critical function.<sup>44</sup> The American critic attempted to prove this thesis by using both historic material, in particular the example of European painting produced after World War I, as well as interest in neo-Expressionism during the 1980s. He demonstrated that in the first instance, the return to figuration was connected with the development of totalitarianism in Europe (in Germany, Russia and Italy), or with the development of politically reactionary attitudes in democratic countries such as France, as seen, for instance, in Jean Cocteau's famous *Rappel à L'Ordre* (1926) (Cocteau also reconverted to Catholicism at that time).<sup>45</sup> Similarly, in the 1980s the popularity of so-called 'new painting' or 'new expression' was connected, according to Buchloh, with reactionary politics. However, this interpretive model cannot be applied to Eastern European new figuration, which operated within completely different historic and political contexts and completely different art geography. One could say in general that the interpretative tools developed within the context of Western art can only be applied to the analysis of Eastern Europe as a region with difficulty.

It is worth emphasizing, however, that during the 1960s figurative art did not have the same status in all the countries of the region. The differences resulted not only from differences in the political situations in different countries, but also from particular circumstances created by local art history. In countries such as Hungary, where there was no continuity between the phase of Modernism and the new interest in contemporary figurative art, new figuration (often situated within the sphere of Pop art) took over the task of politically engaged critique and opposition. However in those countries, such as Poland and Yugoslavia, that did not experience the imposition of a 'wall', either in a physical or metaphoric sense, and where Modernism, mainly in the form of *Art informel*, immediately preceded new figuration, the latter had a more ambivalent status. This ambivalence was enhanced in the early 1960s by the local Communist parties in Yugoslavia (for a relatively short period) and in Poland (for a somewhat longer duration), which began expressing certain reservations about Modernism. In Poland, one of the symptoms of this shift was the aforementioned introduction of an official resolution which stipulated that exhibitions of contemporary art could include no more than fifteen per cent of abstractions.<sup>46</sup> In Yugoslavia there were no such grotesque directives, but at the beginning of 1963 here too the top-level Federal institutions and officials, including Marshal Tito himself, launched an attack on abstract art.<sup>47</sup> It is striking that this was almost at the same time Khrushchev started a similar campaign against modern art in the USSR.<sup>48</sup> Although this campaign was relatively short-lived and did not have lasting effects, nevertheless it provided

a potentially problematic context for new figuration. It could be viewed as a form of quiet cooperation with the regime, especially since the authorities did indeed support new figuration, at least to a certain extent, within the sphere of official art institutions.

The situation in the GDR was rather more straightforward. Here the state-run art institutions established a demarcation line between official and unofficial culture. Even though those institutions espoused the same ideology as the independent artists, such as A. R. Penck, they ultimately determined the artists' ability to participate in the official art scene. All independent artists, irrespective of their actual art practice, operated outside the only professional East German art association, Verband Bildender Künstler (VBK). In contrast, in Hungary, the paradox of figuration, especially of forms of figuration that referred to Pop art, was that the authorities soon began implementing strategies meant to encourage economic development (greater openness towards the West, mainly in economic terms, introduction of certain aspects of consumer society and so forth) that closely corresponded to values evoked by this form of painting. Yet this process began at the moment when a significant number of Hungarian artists, including many painters associated with Pop art, began to experiment with completely different approaches, namely those associated with the neo-avant-garde. In Hungary, as in the other countries of Eastern Europe, the artists and the public considered neo-avant-garde art as providing, to a greater or lesser extent, an alternative to the official cultural policies of the regime.

The situation in Czechoslovakia was different still. Here the development of culture during the 1960s was very dynamic, much more so than either before or after. The country as a whole opened itself to contemporaneity. New figuration, which was associated here with the international art scene, rather than ethically ambivalent discourses (as was the case in Poland or Yugoslavia), was seen as a sign of this new openness, as evidence of Czechoslovak artists' participation in global contemporary art, and a symptom of cultural aspirations that, for a brief moment, united the country, bringing together the Communist authorities and Czechoslovak society.

Jiří Kolář was one of the most original Czechoslovak artists of this period. His work extended beyond what is generally understood as new figuration.<sup>49</sup> The artist had a rich and varied background. During the war, he was affiliated with Group 42, which attracted artists working in a realist style and continuing, at least in part, the 1930s tradition of *Neue Sachlichkeit*. He also wrote concrete poetry, which would eventually lead to his later art experiments. In the 1960s he began creating what he called 'poem-objects'. In the process, Kolář invented a large number of collage techniques, or rather permutations of collage, such

as ‘muchlage’ (consisting of distorted, cut-up photographs), ‘intercollage’ or ‘prolage’ (consisting of combined fragments of paintings, cut out in a shape of everyday objects), ‘confrontage’ (consisting of enlarged and combined fragments of photographs), ‘rapportage’ (as in reportage, consisting of individual photo frames), ‘chiasmage’ (consisting of geometric forms produced by small letters and fragments of text creating an impression of a wallpaper design) and others.<sup>50</sup> The artist always used objects, ready-made images and fragments of popular, contemporary iconosphere. Those objects always made references to a certain type of humour, surprise, or joke or to objectified or object-embedded poetry. The aesthetic and technique of those works resembles, to a certain extent, the art philosophy associated with new realism, but cannot be reduced to the art conventions of its milieu. The poetic qualities of the object, the play of meanings, the mixing of the signifying systems and, above all, the references to the mundane reality of the ‘urban folklore’ (newspapers, illustrated magazines, icons of contemporaneity and so on) situate this art within the sphere of influence of new realism. However, the emphasis on paratextual values, in particular the specific use of terms and the artist’s literary background, give Kolář’s art a separate and distinct status.

The games that Kolář played with different signifying systems had a ‘light’ and, in a certain sense, playful character. However, on one occasion reality intervened, making his work into a witness of a historic tragedy. His 52-part piece, *Newsreel*, executed over the course of 1968, consisted of weekly episodes commenting on the artist’s personal experiences and public happenings.<sup>51</sup> The chronicle began very innocently, if not optimistically, with a wish for a happy new year. In the following episodes, the artist described his trips, exhibitions which he visited, daily experiences, his divorce. He included fragments of his thoughts; he used the technique of ‘chiasmage’ to create a self-portrait out of fragments of texts, paintings and various scraps of reality: tickets, journals, photographs and so on. At a certain point Kolář started including fragments from the daily press, dramatic photographs of political meetings, conferences, visits and so forth. He did not limit himself to the Czech press. In June the artist went to Paris and included references to the dramatic events of the previous May in his ‘weekly’. Above all, however, the *Newsreel* was permeated by the events related to Czechoslovak internal political situation. It was invaded by references to uncertainty, political drama, words that revealed growing tensions.

Beginning in the spring of 1968, the artist’s collages became increasingly dominated by the largest Czechoslovak newspaper, *Rudé Právo*, in particular by its front page. We see reports and photos from state visits of Josip Broz Tito and Nicolae Ceaușescu, who assured the Czechs of their support for the Prague

Spring. There are also reports from the meeting of the leaders of the Warsaw Pact countries held in Moscow. The board dated 21 August 1968 (illus. 81) includes an official communiqué cut out from the newspaper which states:

To the citizens of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. Yesterday, August 20, 1968, at 23:00 the troops of the Soviet Union, People's Republic of Poland, German Democratic Republic, People's Republic of Hungary and People's Republic of Bulgaria crossed the borders of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. This occurred without the permission of the President of the Republic, the Chairman of the National Assembly, the Prime Minister, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, and related agencies.

On the first page of the newspaper, in the place where the declaration was originally published, the artists pasted a white piece of paper with cutouts of



81. Jiří Kolář,  
Newsreel, 1968.

butterflies through which one can see fragments of Henri Rousseau's painting *War*. The next board includes a notice demanding the release of the Czech leadership. On later boards there are many signs of opposition against the occupants and crimes committed by the latter, references to declarations and regulations concerning the so-called public order. But there is also documentation of other events: the death of a friend, the painter Jiří Balcar, an earthquake in Iran, visits to Venice and Nuremberg, a sketch for a portrait of Marcel Duchamp connected with the artist's recent death, and so forth. On the last board, produced during the last week of the year, there is a photograph of a deformed face, composed from parts of various painted faces in such a way that one face can be seen behind the other. The board bears a title: 'In the Face of a New Year 1969'. The year 1968, particularly important for Czechoslovak culture, had ended, but the story had not.

# 6

## The Critique of Painting: Towards the Neo-avant-garde

The painted canvas, understood as a sublimation of the artwork itself, was associated – within the neo-avant-garde critique of painting articulated in the late 1950s – with art practice and art discourse that had faith in universal values, shared aesthetics, the autonomy of art, the primacy of visuality and the dominance of ‘high’, Eurocentric, masculine culture. Such valorization did not pertain solely to particular forms of art practice but, above all, to the hierarchy of culture as such and to the dynamics of power inscribed therein. According to neo-avant-garde critics, the discourse of universalism and autonomy masked the strategies of national, cultural, gender and political dominance situated within a particular society or, as Serge Guilbaut suggested, internationally.<sup>1</sup>

However, such an interpretive model, developed mainly within the Anglo-American context, can only be transplanted into Eastern Europe with considerable difficulty. In the first place, the hegemony of the centre grounded in the rhetoric of universalism was not perceived here as a strategy of repression but of liberation. The idea of the autonomy of art, seen in the West as an impediment to social and political critique, was viewed in Communist countries as a manifestation of opposition to the forced politicization of art. In addition, some elements of the neo-avant-garde discourse of the 1960s, in particular Marxist references, were received with a certain degree of suspicion by the independent art circles of Eastern Europe (with the exception of the GDR), and others, such as those articulated from a feminist perspective, were taken up much later.

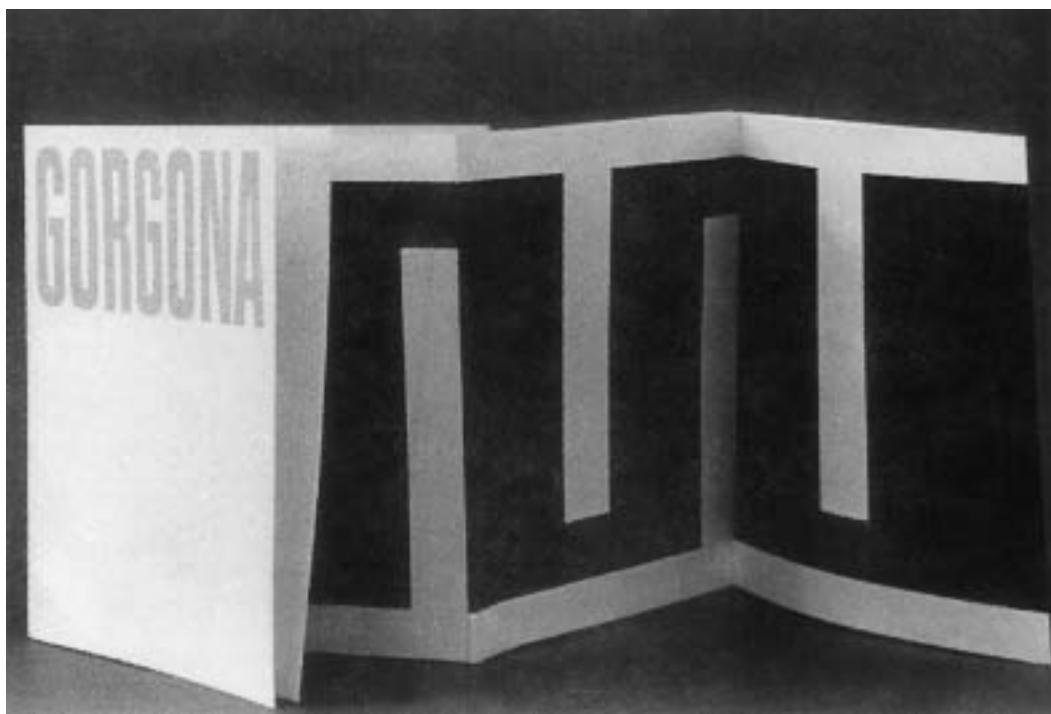
The basic difficulty of any comparative analysis of the region rests in the differences between the trajectories of local histories of Modernism. During the post-Stalinist period in Poland and Yugoslavia, Modernism quickly lost its oppositional character, gaining, especially in Yugoslavia, an official status.<sup>2</sup> In

other countries, such as Romania, the GDR and Hungary, where for a variety of reasons the process of de-Stalinization took a different route, Modernism (if one can even speak of the art production in those countries in such terms) was far removed from the official culture. The diversity of circumstances in which Modernism functioned in Eastern Europe, the differences between the East and the West, but also, and perhaps most importantly, within the Eastern Bloc, determined the character of local critiques of Modernist painting that began appearing in the late 1950s under the impact of de-Stalinization of culture and the development of 'thaw' Modernism and came to an abrupt close in the late 1960s as a result of a different set of political and cultural events.

One of the first signs of a systematic critique of Modernist painting can be found in 1959 in Zagreb in the work of the group Gorgona (illus. 82, 83). Some of its members, in particular Dimitrije Bašicević (also known as Mangelos), already had some experience in this area. Although a few instances of similar attitudes could be found in other countries of the region in the late



82. Josip  
Vaništa,  
*Gorgona*, No. 1,  
1961.  
Museum of  
Contemporary  
Art, Zagreb.



83. Julije Knifer,  
*Gorgona*, No. 2,  
1961.  
Museum of  
Contemporary  
Art, Zagreb.

1950s, it was here in Croatia, one of the Yugoslav republics, that the entire art scene showed an interest in the critique of painting, inaugurating a tendency that would fully develop elsewhere in the 1970s. Gorgona formed in 1959 and remained active until 1966.<sup>3</sup> The collective included painters (Marijan Jevšovar, Julije Knifer, Duro Sender and Josip Vaništa), a sculptor (Ivan Kožarić), an architect (Miljenko Horvat), and, unusually and significantly, three art historians, Matko Meštrović, Radoslav Putar and Dimitrije Bašicević, whose poem supplied the group's name. Until the mid-1960s, Bašicević/Mangelos concealed his art practice, to which he referred as 'not-art', and functioned 'officially' as a theorist, critic, art historian and curator.<sup>4</sup> Later, he stressed the 'private' character of his art practice and its distance from the Gorogona's exhibitions, as well as his limited participation in the group's activities, which consisted mainly of spending time with other members, going for walks and on trips, and engaging in conversations.<sup>5</sup> His first solo show, entitled *Picasso Phenomenon*, took place in 1972 in Novi Sad, several years after the break-up of the group.

Gorgona functioned entirely outside the official Yugoslav art system, though its members were naturally connected with the local art world through their professional affiliations and contacts. The group's activities consisted of

organizing exhibitions in the so-called Studio G, also known as Salon Šira, located in a space rented from a Zagreb frame shop, and of publication of an anti-journal, *Gorgona*.<sup>6</sup> Sue Cramer writes that the group opposed the ‘official taste’ of the Croatian art establishment, though she does not mention the fact that by the mid-1960s, the official Yugoslav culture had a more Modernist, rather than Socialist Realist, flavour. Cramer stresses the point that the state censors showed no interest in *Gorgona* because the members did not produce overtly political works. Instead, the group’s history reveals the general difficulties facing radical and experimental artists in a country lacking a free art market, in which the official art system was controlled by the authorities, who selectively parcellled out subventions and other forms of cultural patronage.<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy that in other countries of Eastern Europe, for instance East Germany and Romania, at approximately the same time the Communist regimes used much more direct and oppressive means for implementing their cultural policies.

It is not that the official cultural policies kept *Gorgona* marginalized within the art world of Yugoslavia or Croatia, but that the members of the group in a conscious and deliberate manner chose to function on the periphery of the art scene. This was an intentional strategy clearly recognized by the Western artists who collaborated with the group. When *Gorgona* invited Piero Manzoni to produce an issue of its journal (each issue featured and was prepared by a single artist), he did not hesitate, though unfortunately the project was never realized.<sup>8</sup> In 1961 Josip Vanića defined *Gorgona*’s anti-programme, which clearly articulated the group’s desire to be located on the margin of the art world. He wrote:

Gorgona has no psychological, moral or symbolic meaning. *Gorgona* stands for absolute transience in art. *Gorgona* doesn’t ask for either a product or a result in art. *Gorgona* is contradictory. She is defined as the sum of all her possible definitions. *Gorgona* is serious and simple.

He also added, ‘*Gorgona* is constantly in doubt . . . Valuating most that which is dead. *Gorgona* speaks of nothing. Undefined and undetermined’.<sup>9</sup>

*Gorgona* not only engaged in a critique of painting, but attempted to eliminate it altogether. Without a doubt this was one of the first manifestations of conceptual art in Eastern Europe. In his 1964 work *Painting*, Josip Vanića, one of the group’s leaders, did not produce a (painted) canvas, but instead described in quasi-clinical terms a ‘non-existent’ (outside the discourse) object: ‘a horizontal canvas format, width 180 cm, height 140 cm, entire surface white, a silver line flows horizontally across the middle of the canvas (width 180 cm, height 3 cm)’.<sup>10</sup> This radical act was grounded in Vanića’s and other

Gorgona members' experiments and projects. Several years earlier, in 1959, Julije Knifer created the first version of his famous meander (his signature piece), from a piece of zigzagging black tape. Shown at many different venues, exhibitions and plain-air shows, the meander functioned as an ironic commentary on neo-Constructivism, very popular in Croatia at the time, and the entire tradition of the Modernist avant-garde. Because it was repeatable and repeated in so many different locations, Knifer's meander also neutralized the notion of a singular work of art, eliminated its unique meaning and referentiality, and, in the process, demythologized such Modernist values as innovation, originality, development and so forth. It is worth noting that from the perspective of art historic chronology, Knifer's project preceded Daniel Buren's first installation of his signature dual colour stripes by several years.

The second issue of *Gorgona* (1961) consisted entirely of a meander. In the first issue (also released in 1961), Josip Vaništa published an equally innovative project that critiqued the Modernist cult of painting. Each of the ten pages of the issue featured a photograph of an empty store-front window. The photos were devoid of emotional content, cool, and presented without aesthetic pretensions. In the sixth issue (1961), Vaništa included a photograph of Mona Lisa. In a commentary he wrote, 'I have chosen the subject which is the most meaningless to reproduce. To reproduce the Mona Lisa is the same as leaving an empty page'.<sup>11</sup> The eleventh and last issue of the *Gorgona*, published in 1966 and also designed by Vaništa, consisted entirely of a repeated photograph of the issue's title page.

In 1961 Vaništa produced a series of paintings that provided a point of departure for his conceptual *Painting* of 1964. According to Nena Dimitrijević, this series consisted of monochromatic canvases, painted in gray, silver and white, whose surface was interrupted at a midpoint by a single element, a horizontal line, described by Vaništa as the only remnant of content or a theme in the otherwise non-representational painting. The same year Vaništa made the following declaration that moved his critique of Modernist painting a step further:

Aim for simplicity in painting. Aim for sparseness. Avoid illusionism. A very finished look: the negation of painting approach. School [is] not necessary. Drawing or drawing experience included. The ways and means of traditional painting are insufficient. Do not change the paint in the can while working. A signature is not necessary.<sup>12</sup>

This statement formed the basis of his later conceptual works. The artist observed during this period that 'I stopped painting paintings when I realized

that it was sufficient to formulate them by means of language'.<sup>13</sup> This was the context for the radical idea of 'an exhibition without an exhibition', which anticipated Seth Siegelaub's famous project '44 East 52nd Street'. While both Vaništa and Siegelaub proposed an exhibition that did not contain any works, the Yugoslav artist demonstrated a much keener sense of humour. Siegelaub showed 'traces' of works in form of their documentation; Vaništa proposed that his exhibition should include, as any good exhibition would, 'formal' descriptions and analysis of non-existent (in the visual sphere) 'paintings' prepared by poet and critic Zvonimir Mrkonjić.<sup>14</sup> In a similar spirit, Mangelos proposed that his issue of *Gorgona* would not be published.<sup>15</sup>

*Gorgona*'s actions within the sphere of social communication, which anticipated mail-art to a certain extent, should also be viewed as a form of cultural critique. In 1961 the group's members sent out an invitation to a mailing list, emulating the custom of exhibition venues, informing the recipients: 'you are invited'. However, they did not specify where, when, at what time or by whom 'one was invited'. They also sent out the so-called 'Thoughts for the Month' consisting of aphorisms, quotations and fragments of various texts by better or less known authors. The entire complex of *Gorgona*'s activities – conceptual, communicative, linked to exhibitions or publications – functioned as a critique of the art culture that perceived Modernism as a type of sublimation associated with an existential philosophical attitude. This aspect certainly distinguished *Gorgona* from Western, mainly Anglo-American, conceptual art, which tended to be much more analytic and critical of the system of power, of society and of art itself. Dimitrijević writes about 'the spirit of *Gorgona*' and 'spiritual dimension' of its activities. He also described the group's projects as a 'means of existence'.

Whether and to what extend *Gorgona*'s work responded to the political situation in Yugoslavia, a question with which I began this chapter and which has been raised by Sue Cramer, is of secondary importance in this context. It is more important to emphasize the fact that *Gorgona*'s critique was significantly different from analogous critiques carried out in the West within the context of the neo-avant-garde. The early Western neo-avant-garde movements adopted a decidedly negative attitude towards the Modernist universe of values, rejecting or subjecting to a critique the entire mythology of painting and its cultural philosophy, including the existential philosophy associated with *Art informel*. Their critiques were often based on an analytic approach, whereas in Eastern Europe the critique of the Modernist painting was entangled, as we have seen in *Gorgona*'s case, with existential impulses. By invoking such concepts as 'freedom', 'absurdity', 'nihilism', 'irony', 'metaphysics' and so forth, ideas that were often associated with Modernist painting and in particular *Art*

*informel*, Gorgona did not create a clean break between Modernism and the neo-avant-garde, as was often the case in the West.

Analysing this aspect of Gorgona's projects, it is worth considering in greater detail the work of Dimitrije Bašicević/Mangelos. It is clear that Mangelos was a highly untypical artist and that his work cannot be contained by the framework used to discuss Gorgona. He began working as a 'private' artist before the group was formed, during the period when his main professional identity was that of an art historian and author of a number of interesting academic treatises. Mangelos began producing his 'not-art' during the war. His *Landscapes of Death* and *Landscapes of War*, which consisted of signs and letters borrowed from different alphabets (Greek, Latin, Cyrillic) and languages, were created in 1941 and 1942 respectively.<sup>16</sup> Those works clearly point to the existential foundation of his art. The empty surface reminded the artist of the graves, silence, emptiness, nothingness and death that surrounded him, death unmediated by narrative, literary means or stylistic distance.<sup>17</sup> According to Branka Stipaničić, those early works, the artist's later poetry and his 'not-histories' made references to the Polish poet

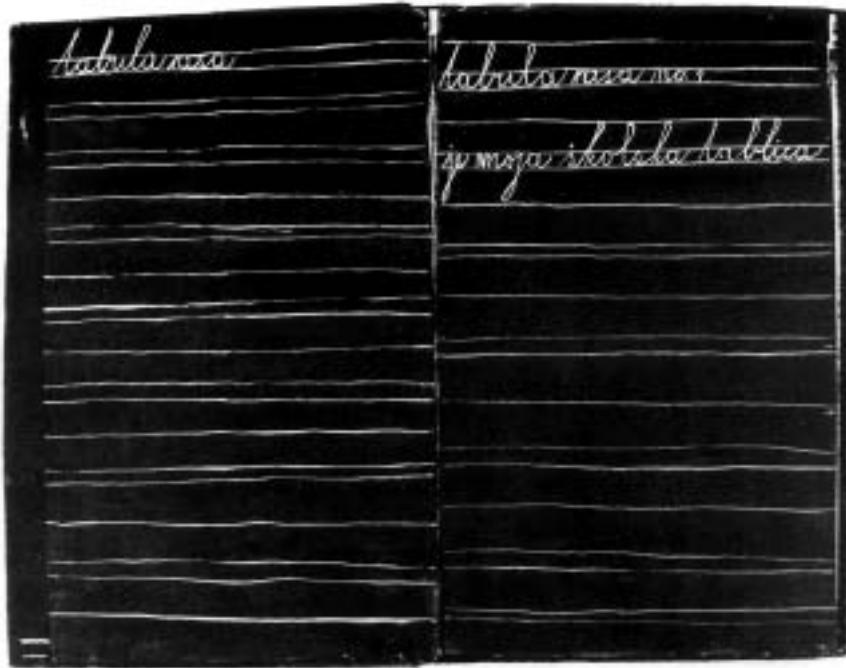


84. Dimitrije  
Bašicević  
Mangelos,  
*Landscape of Al  
Capone*, 1952.  
Städtisches  
Museum  
Abteiberg,  
Mönchen-  
gladbach.

Tadeusz Różewicz, who raised the problem of literature in the context of war. They question the need for poetry during the period when words and rules of poetic articulation have come to an end and suggest a crisis of aesthetics in the face of the Holocaust.<sup>18</sup>

Mangelos relied on such negative references not only in the context of his experience of the war, but also of contemporaneity. He entitled one of his first 'globes' *Landscape of Al Capone* (illus. 84), because 'at that moment I considered the Earth to be a landscape of Al Capone, and we know who Al Capone was'.<sup>19</sup> The questions concerning the character of that experience created a need for an answer. The answer to darkness and irrationality could only be rational; it had to turn towards a norm, a consciousness that one started from a beginning, a point 'zero'. The artist's work *Tribute to Pythagoras* (1953) was supposed to function as such a beginning, a starting point for thinking and creating a 'zero' point, a turn towards rationality and the norm. On the black surface Mangelos wrote a single word: 'Pythagoras', understood as a declaration of rationality and of rational perception of the world.

Those experiences led the artist to develop one of his most important projects, *Tabula Rasa* (illus. 85), which lends itself to discussion as a critique of Modernist painting. The work consists of a black school tablet/slate, which, according to the artist, was 'likely found in an attic'. As any slate, especially



85. Dimitrije Baćicević [Mangelos], *Tabula rasa . . .*, 1953. Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

one used in school, the tablet must be inscribed, ‘it cannot remain clean forever’.<sup>20</sup> In 1953 Mangelos produced a book that embodied this principle. The black pages of the volume were inscribed with the phrase ‘*tabula rasa*’. *Tabula rasa* itself certainly exemplified the tension between the message and the visual presence of the text, the two antithetical dimensions of the work. The act of inscribing the words ‘*tabula rasa*’ negated the truth-value of the message, since the slate was no longer ‘clean’.

This tension provides an important clue to Mangelos’s art. His work is not attempting to join forms of art practice, such as the production of books as conceptual projects, which were popular in Eastern Europe and which functioned as an alternative to the official, institutionalized art.<sup>21</sup> Neither is it a symptom of the anti-art attitude. According to Leonida Kovač, Mangelos’s ‘not-art’ becomes visual by questioning art’s visuality; it thereby negated ‘its own negation’.<sup>22</sup> Those tensions cannot be eliminated, in the same way that one cannot eliminate the tension between the text inscribed on the black slate, ‘*tabula rasa*’, and the slate itself. In the artist’s works a simple affirmative statement is always contrasted with its negation. For instance, in another work, a phrase in old Slovene ‘prezhde ubo slovo’ (at the beginning there was a word) is accompanied by another phrase in German, ‘am beginn war es kein wort’ (at the beginning there was no word). The tensions between the word and the visual sign, the meaning and its negation, art and ‘not-art’, function as an axis of Mangelos’s art. The artist claimed, ‘the most philosophical, the most theoretical explanation of not-art is not-art’.<sup>23</sup>

Mangelos’s critique of painting is built on the foundation of existential experience: ‘this grave became a *tabula rasa* for me’, he stated.<sup>24</sup> However, it did not consist of a ‘simple’ rejection of painting, the kind one can see in Vaništa’s conceptual projects. Branka Stipančić observed that

Mangelos does not start within reduction, he does not negate the white surface, he does not destroy a painting, a reproduction . . . Negating a particular aesthetic, the traditional concept of painting, he is back in the black meditative field he started with. Something had to be written on the picture. Mangelos writes letters – paints letters.<sup>25</sup>

One could say that Mangelos’s critique of painting is not very radical. It is, however, much more thorough than Gorgona’s conceptual projects, because it takes into account inescapable contradictions, which determine the condition of painting. The transformation of a letter into a painting is unavoidable. One could even say that Mangelos anticipates conceptual art to a certain extent by revealing the naïveté of conceptual artists who believed that the act of writing a text eliminated painting and situated their works beyond the realm of visual

reality. The artist suggests that there is no such option. Shifting the terms of Kovač's description, one could say that Mangelos's critique of painting becomes a critique of the critique of painting formulated later by the neo-avant-garde. After all, what is the status of the famous telegrams sent by the Japanese artist On Kawara in the late 1960s and early '70s, in which he only included the information: 'I am still alive'? They were supposed to negate not only art's aesthetic/visual, but also expressive and 'objective' functions. A telegram, subject to postal rules, was supposed to neutralize all traditional art associations. And yet, since this work has been exhibited by museums, international art exhibitions and art galleries, did it not become a visual object subjected to museological discipline as a 'work of art'? According to Mangelos, this occurred because it could not have happened any other way. The image and the word, visuality and text, are bound together; the tension that exists between them cannot be eliminated.

While the artists of Gorgona chose to critique painting through a conceptual approach, those associated with OHO, a group formed in 1966 in neighbouring Slovenia (at a time when Gorgona was no longer active) chose a different strategy. OHO's members turned to reism to produce their critique of Modernist painting. This pertains in particular to the first phase of their association, described as their 'reist' period. Later, around 1970, their art took a different form, becoming known as 'transcendental conceptualism'.<sup>26</sup>

Igor Zabel, the author of a major monograph on the group, described its art philosophy as 'post-humanism'.<sup>27</sup> Statements by the leading artists of OHO, Iztok Geister and Marko Pogačnik, provide ample evidence of this 'post-humanist', 'reist' worldview. But those statements do not speak to an existential crisis, since existential issues did not occupy the attention of OHO in the way that they did Gorgona's. The group's name, OHO, which combines two Slovenian words 'oko' (eye) and 'uh' (ear), demarcated the territory of its interests: sensual perception of reality, understood not so much as an expression of opinions about the world as its observation.<sup>28</sup> In this context, the elevation of the gaze to an absolute value did not so much eliminate man and his individual human existence, as his special status among other objects. In effect, it did away with the differentiation of the world into man-thing, thing-thing, man-man, based solely on the external appearance.

Naturally, this levelling of the hierarchy between the subject and the object eliminated man's privileged position. According to Zabel, the group's main goal was to insert an equal sign between art and life in order to create a possibility of a new 'post-humanist' or 'reist' perception, rather than to change the reality in accordance with the old avant-garde aspirations. Objects of everyday use borrowed from mass culture, consumer reality, pop culture as

86. Marko Pogačnik,  
*Bottles*, 1967.  
Moderna Galerija,  
Ljubljana.



well as Pop art (which influenced OHO's attitude and works) were to have the same status as the image of a human being – one more thing among other things. Marko Pogačnik's casts of bottles (illus. 86), one of the best-known OHO works from the mid-1960s, the artist's so-called 'pop-items', ready-made objects, plaster casts, and so forth, as well as 'OHO books', all could be seen in terms of a critique of the Modernist art mythology and a desire to eliminate the 'art-work' with its aura of uniqueness, autonomy, expression and existentialism. The 'work of art' was replaced by an object that an artist did not have to create; it was sufficient that he simply noticed it among other things. This form of the artist's gaze was supposed to be neutral and disengaged, devoid of expression, pathos or existential motives.

OHO's method of critiquing Modernist painting by substituting ordinary objects for it was a common practice of the 1960s neo-avant-garde throughout the world, including Eastern Europe, though it was motivated by different factors in different places. Often object-art functioned, as in the case of OHO, as a form of transition to body-art and happening, as well as conceptual art. Such evolution took a virtually exemplary path in the Slovene art of the second half of the 1960s. Zabel writes that, towards the end of 1968, just as Geister and Pogačnik were drafted into the army, OHO was joined by Andraž Šalamun, an artist intimately familiar with Western art who introduced the group to *arte povera*. The poetics of material associated with *arte povera* certainly posed a

challenge to OHO's reist art philosophy.<sup>29</sup> His outdoor and gallery-based actions, in which Šalamun used hay, bricks, corn straw and wood, confirm this view (Zagreb, 1969, Kranj, 1969). Simultaneously, he organized planned happenings in which he used his own body to explore erotic subtexts (*Kama Sutra*, 1969).

But Šalamun was not the only artist in Ljubljana with such interests. One must also mention in this context David Nez, whose *Cosmology* (1969) is generally considered to be the 'purest' form of OHO's body art.<sup>30</sup> The work consisted of the artist lying with his legs and arms spread in a circle made from fluorescent lights. A stone was placed on his stomach and a lit light bulb was suspended directly over his prone body. The performance invoked, on the one hand, cosmological symbolism: the circle referred to the sun, the bulb to the moon, the stone to the earth. The artist was situated at the centre of those cosmological forces. On the other hand, as notes Zabel, Nez's performance signalled also general interest in space travel, in particular the recent moon landing.<sup>31</sup>

When Pogačnik returned to OHO after having served in the army, the group began producing more rationalized projects approaching conceptual art, which, however, continued to rely on the group's experiences gained during its reist period. Beginning in 1969, Pogačnik and other members of OHO produced diagrams depicting various interactions between water, fire and air (Pogačnik, *Family of Fire, Water and Air*, 1969), logical operations, possible combinations of particular elements, tables depicting structures of various phenomena, and so forth. They also realized conceptual projects that took place in physical reality. For instance, in his *Family of Weight, Measure and Position* (1969), Pogačnik suspended weights on elastic strings in order to 'examine' the relationship between different physical properties: weight, measure and position of the object. The artists also began to show interests in esoteric subjects, searching for universal harmony and a spiritual framework for the group's function, its link to the Universe. Through those explorations the group entered the phase of so-called 'transcendental conceptualism',<sup>32</sup> during which diagrams demonstrating logical processes were replaced with ones charting cosmological relationships, for instance, the principles connecting various elements of the cosmos (Pogačnik, *God, Angels and Devil*, 1970). The direct outcome of those experiments was the founding of the art commune in the town of Šempas, based on the principle of man's harmonious existence with his environment, the heavens and the earth.

In 1958, a year before the founding of Gorgona in Zagreb, Polish artist Włodzimierz Borowski created his first 'artons' (*Arton*; illus. 87). He produced those works at a time when virtually every other Polish artist was painting *Art*

87. Włodzimierz Borowski,  
Arton A, 1958.  
National  
Museum,  
Wrocław.



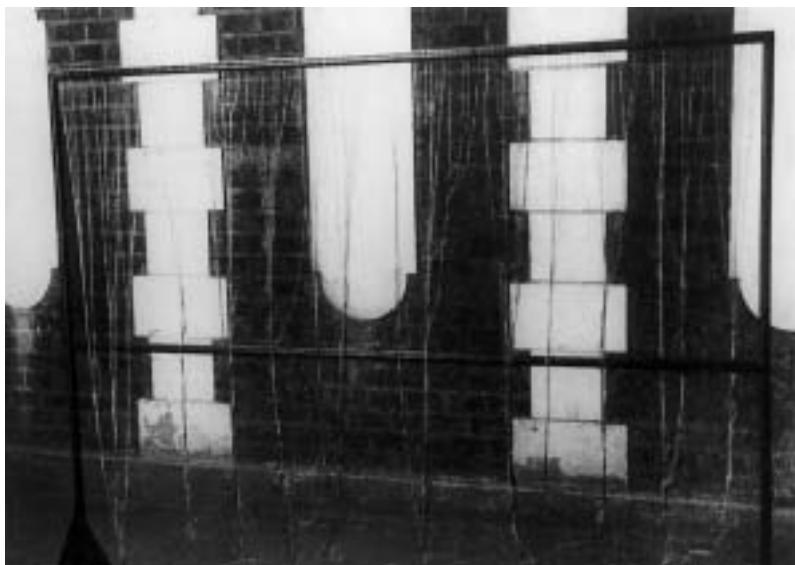
*informel* canvases, during the period described by Mieczysław Porębski as both 'a mass mobilization' of *Art informel* and a form of 'group psychosis'.<sup>33</sup> Borowski's *artons* maintained an ironic distance from the problem of image-making. Jerzy Ludwiński described them as a form of assemblage consisting of a variety of different elements, usually of a 'non-artistic' nature – glass, mirrors, neon bulbs, bicycle wheels – conceived as a type of homage to Duchamp.<sup>34</sup> From that moment on, the artist often used objects, seeing in them an alternative to painting. He visibly referenced Duchamp in several works, thereby reifying the history of Modernism. In addition to *Collection of Stands for Rug Cleaning* (illus. 88), a work that invoked an ordinary object (an outdoor metal frame used for cleaning carpets), he also produced *Threaders* (*Niciowce*, 1966–7), which 'Polonized' Duchamp's *stoppages-étealon*.

Borowski made an ironic reference to the French artist's work in his *Window Threader* (illus. 89), which consisted of a windowframe fished out from a lake (born in the waves like Aphrodite), covered by seaweed. The work recalled Duchamp's *Fresh Window* (1920), and was likely a perverse reference to a female, though perhaps not to Aphrodite. However, if Duchamp offered the viewer a verbal pun (his object was in a form of the so-called French window), Borowski created, instead, a situational pun in which the tradition of avant-garde art (Duchamp) was only one element involved in the production of the

work's meaning. The object was a focal point of a performance that took place during the Osieki open-air festival in 1967, a day after Tadeusz Kantor's *Panoramic Sea Happening*. Ludwiński described the event in the following way:

One could see Borowski's [performance] the next day as a type of artistic response, perhaps not exactly to this particular happening [Kantor's], but to all great happenings. Borowski submerged in the lake a cabin window. Beforehand, he decorated it with colourful ribbons, then nature herself gave him a hand. In the evening, the window was solemnly pulled out from the water. Over the lake several flickering lights were lit, which the participants used to illuminate the place when the window rested under the water. When it was pulled out, it turned out that in addition to colourful threads and strands, the window was also covered in seaweed . . . Now four people carried the covered window through the park. Behind them walked the author, and behind him an entire procession of artists and invited guests. On the square in front of the boarding house [where the artists lived], the window with everything still on it was attached to a telegraph pole. Now those who carried it broke the glass panes with metal picks. The author, who stood by, took off his hat; this was the only gesture he made that evening. This was the end of performance called 'tipping the hat'.<sup>35</sup>

Here the critique of painted image was combined with a critique of then current avant-garde art practice. The absurdity of the entire event, the reference to the tradition of the avant-garde (Duchamp), and the pathos of contemporary art was underlined by the ironic act of 'tipping the hat', constituting the artist's



88. Włodzimierz Borowski,  
*Collection of Stands for Rug Cleaning*, 1968.  
courtesy  
Włodzimierz Borowski.

curtsy to the presumed gravity of artistic creation. Borowski not only focused his critique on painting or on the work of art, but also on the myth of the artist. In an ironic dialogue with the Modernist tradition, he reified himself, the alleged demiurge. By rendering his own position absurd, he thereby subjected the mythology of the artist-creator to a critique.

He performed a similar operation during the Symposium of Artists and Scientists held at the chemical factory in Puławy in 1966, when he enacted his *IV Syncretic Demonstration*. The artist, dressed in a tuxedo, 'gifted' the factory with one of its own pieces of equipment as his artwork. In this instance, Borowski subjected to a critical inspection the role of the artist-creator, the role of the factory as a patron of art (a move that in the context of the symposium had decidedly political overtones), and a custom, common in the Communist world, of bestowing upon places of employment artworks executed during the so-called 'open air' residences.

The last of Borowski's so-called 'demonstrations', *VIII Syncretic Demonstration*, which took place in the Poznań-based Galleria odNOWA in 1968



8g. Włodzimierz  
Borowski,  
*Window  
Threading*,  
1967, National  
Museum,  
Wrocław.

(illus. 90), presented perhaps the most fully developed critique of the Modernist myth of the artist. The performance revealed the artist's radical attitude towards image-making, conceptualized as an axiological model of contemporary art. Borowski filled the narrow space of the gallery with his *Threaders*, a series of cases with bundles of strands attached to the frames, and a large amount of newspapers were strewn on the floor. In the corners of the gallery space, the artist installed photographic self-portraits. During the opening, with the help of the audience members, he drilled holes in the eyes of the photos against an audio background of taped screams. When he was finished, the empty eye sockets began emitting colourful light and the audio changed to sounds of a military march. The happening was subtitled 'Exercises in Colour Theory, Dedicated to the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań'. The irony of the work was based in the fact that the school was dominated by faculty members who embraced colourism and trained students according to criteria developed within the context of post-Impressionism. The artist's performance – his destruction of his own self-portrait, which culminated in the projection of coloured light through the artist's eyes and the solemn sounds of a military march – demystified the Modernist-colourist myth of the artist creator, which identified sight and colour as the main instruments of artistic creativity.

Borowski's desire to eliminate the artist and thereby remove the author's authority was even more apparent in an earlier performance, *Taint Pubes (Fubki Tarb)* (a pun on the Polish phrase 'tubki farb', or paint tubes), which



go. Włodzimierz  
Borowski, VIII  
*Syncretic*  
*Show*, 1968.  
Galeria  
odNOWA,  
Poznań.

took place in the Gallery Under the Mona Lisa in Wrocław in 1967. The exhibition consisted of photographs of well-known figures from the Polish art world shown attending art openings and visiting exhibitions. At the opening, a sealed envelope was opened and the text entitled ‘Taint Pubes’ was read in which the artist compared the audience to paint. He stressed that the audience was a living material and foundation of art necessary for the creation of the work. In this context, the author came to occupy a much less significant position. Hence he did not appear at his own opening. Ludwiński succinctly summed up: ‘The Author disappeared . . . Borowski first eliminated the canvas, then himself’.<sup>36</sup>

Writing about ‘the Death of the Author’, Roland Barthes observed that in the classical conception of literature, the author is indispensable. He is a figure that has a biography, identity and so forth. The apogee of this way of thinking takes place within the capitalist ideology, which attaches a great deal of importance to the subjectivity of the author. However, it is not the author that speaks through the text, but the language. This fact was already acknowledged by Mallarmé and other late nineteenth-century writers. The elimination of the author takes place simultaneously with the activation of the reader, who does not have a biography, psychology or history, and therefore negates the capitalist ideology of reification. ‘Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader’, writes Barthes. ‘For it, the writer is the only person in literature . . . we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author’.<sup>37</sup>

One could apply Barthes’s observations directly to Borowski’s art. However, a more important factor in this context is the absolute focus on the situation, rather than the problem of the text; a critique of the customs or the mechanics of the art scene, rather than language. In the model described by Barthes, language gains greater autonomy and the reader turns into a participant in a game that has as its goal elimination of the author’s fetish-like status within literary culture. In Borowski’s performance of *Taint Pubes*, the artist’s preferential position, the mythology of the demiurge and the figure of the creator are also undermined. But language itself is also eliminated, or rather, art language is identified with the situation and context created by the opening and the exhibition. The artist retreats into the shadows, saying to the audience: you create art because you come to the exhibitions and you find there what you really want to find – yourself. Borowski’s gesture, however, is not an indictment of the audience’s narcissism. Rather, like the work of Duchamp, it is an acknowledgement of the current state of affairs. Duchamp believed that art activates the viewer, who must decide what deserves the status of art. Borowski, following this train of thought, suggests that the very presence of the viewer at



g1. Tadeusz  
Kantor, *Popular  
Exhibition*,  
1963.  
Krzysztofory  
Gallery, Kraków.

the exhibition provides a sufficient argument for art, which itself becomes a form of a critical response to the modern myth of the great artist.

The critique of the artist myth formulated by Borowski can be compared to OHO's 'anti-humanist' attitude, though it had different consequences. Whereas at the centre of Modernism there was a person, a human, an ego of the artist, here at the centre one could only find a text and a context. What resulted was a textualization (con-textualization) of culture, communicated through specific situations. Similarly, works (or their absence) became communicative structures. The object is turned into a text and simultaneously dissolves into context; it loses its integrity and autonomy. By demonstrating this process, Borowski does not so much create a situation of art as reads it; his art functions as a reading of the art-historical process leading from the object (work) through a text to a context. Perhaps one should apply this observation to the entire process of the critique of painting of which Borowski's art is a part. The aesthetics and visual valuation of the work were expressions of Modernism; here in the neo-avant-garde revision of culture, aesthetics are

rejected in favour of the text. When Borowski used a metal stand for cleaning carpets and calls it *Collection of Stands for Rug Cleaning* (1968), he did not do so in the name of an aesthetic quality, but instead in the name of a critique of aesthetization of the work within Modernist painting.

Naturally, Borowski was not the only Polish artist who addressed this problematic in his work. One should also mention here Tadeusz Kantor, who was in the 1950s one of the leading protagonists (if not the leader) of Polish *Art informel* painting. At the end of 1963, the *Popular Exhibition* opened at the Kraków-based Krzysztofory Gallery (illus. 91). Kantor included in it 937 ‘artistic’ (sketches, drawings, projects, diagrams) and ‘inartistic objects’ (more or less banal, though defined in an art language as collage, assemblage, emballage), as well as things ‘of low status’ (artist’s expression) and common use, such as a newspaper, a chair and so on. The exhibition was an extension of the artist’s *Emballage Manifesto* (*emballage* means packaging),<sup>38</sup> which resulted in a very rich body of theatrical as well as visual works using ‘poor’ objects and ‘degraded reality’. Kantor developed this idea a few years earlier. In 1961, he wrote:

I was always interested in the object. I realized that the object itself could not be mastered or approached. Reproduced in a naturalist manner, it turns into a more or less naïve fetish. Colour, which attempts to approach it, becomes entangled in a fascinating adventure of light, matter and illusion. But the object persists inscrutable. Could one not ‘touch’ it in a different way[?] Artificially. Through a negative, impression or by hiding. Through something that obscures it.<sup>39</sup>

Kantor’s concept of *emballage* and hence of the Popular Exhibition or the ‘anti-exhibition’ reveal two separate issues. On the one hand, it points to a fascination with the package itself, something that can potentially hide, secure and protect material objects as well as people (*Live Emballage* with Maria Stangret, 1968). On the other hand, the text of Kantor’s manifesto proposes a critique of painting. It reveals the artist’s attitude towards the object and his desire to ‘defend’ its particularity and, above all, materiality. In other words, Kantor contrasts painting, that is mimetic and image-making art practice, with the material object and its poetic and critical potential to unmask a Modernist mythology of painting: the illusion of its autonomy and exceptionalism.

One can find many examples of such critical use of objects in Kantor’s art. The object was clearly apparent in his theatrical performances staged at Cricot 2, where it functioned as an actor and was conceived as an independent element of the spatial structure and temporal narration. It also appeared independently as an absurd element, such as the ‘discarded’ but monumental chair, which was supposed to be installed in Wrocław as part of the Wrocław

92. Tadeusz Kantor, *Chair*, 1971.



'70 Symposium, but instead was placed next to a highway near Oslo in 1971 (illus. 92) and, after the artist's death, moved next to his house in Hucisko near Kraków. One should add that, in response to Kantor's work, Borowski repeated as part of the Wrocław '70 one of his earlier works, which consisted of two ordinary chairs placed facing each other (*Dialogue*, 1969, 1970).

Returning to Kantor, there are also a number of works in which the artist engaged in a much more direct critique of mimetic art. To this category belong his happenings based on the great masterpieces of European art: *Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt* (Gallery Foksal, 1969) and *Panoramic Sea Happening – The Raft of the Medusa*, which was based on Théodore Géricault's painting and performed on the Baltic coast near Koszalin in 1967. In both cases, Kantor reversed the conventional relationship between reality and performance. The reality did not provide a model for the image, but rather the image became a model for the real event. In those happenings, the artist

engaged in a critique of illusionism and 'materialized' it in a rather ironic way. The great masterpieces of European painting or their images introduced into our cultural canon were rendered absurd, revealing their uncertain status vis-à-vis the real world. They were taken over, just like a number of other objects exhibited as part of the Popular Exhibition and used by Kantor in his theatrical productions (umbrellas, bags, clothes, envelopes, bandages and so on) and works as a type of a ready-made.

Another Polish artist interested in object and performance based art was Andrzej Matuszewski. In 1968 he exhibited a work entitled *21 Objects* in the Poznań gallery odNOWA (illus. 93). It consisted of objects taken from everyday reality: a water spout, a claw foot from a tub, a coat hanger, a lid from a trash-can, mechanisms from a clock and a pump, a door from a tiled room-heater, a fragment of a chair, silverware, a small table, a bench and so forth. Everything was painted red; some of the objects were suspended from lines against white screens, some were placed on the floor. The exhibition was situated within the tradition that incorporated reality as part of art; the tradition of ready-mades, assemblage, neo-Dada and new realism, art that critiques the image-based culture. At the same time, it exceeded that tradition by engaging it in a dialogue. Within that tradition the mundane object functioned as a trace of the reality identified with the material world. It signified rejection of representation in favour of the real, physically present thing. In Matuszewski's work, the space of the gallery, filled with red objects, functioned poetically; it created a narrative



93. Andrzej  
Matuszewski,  
*21 Objects*,  
1968. Galeria  
odNOWA,  
Poznań.

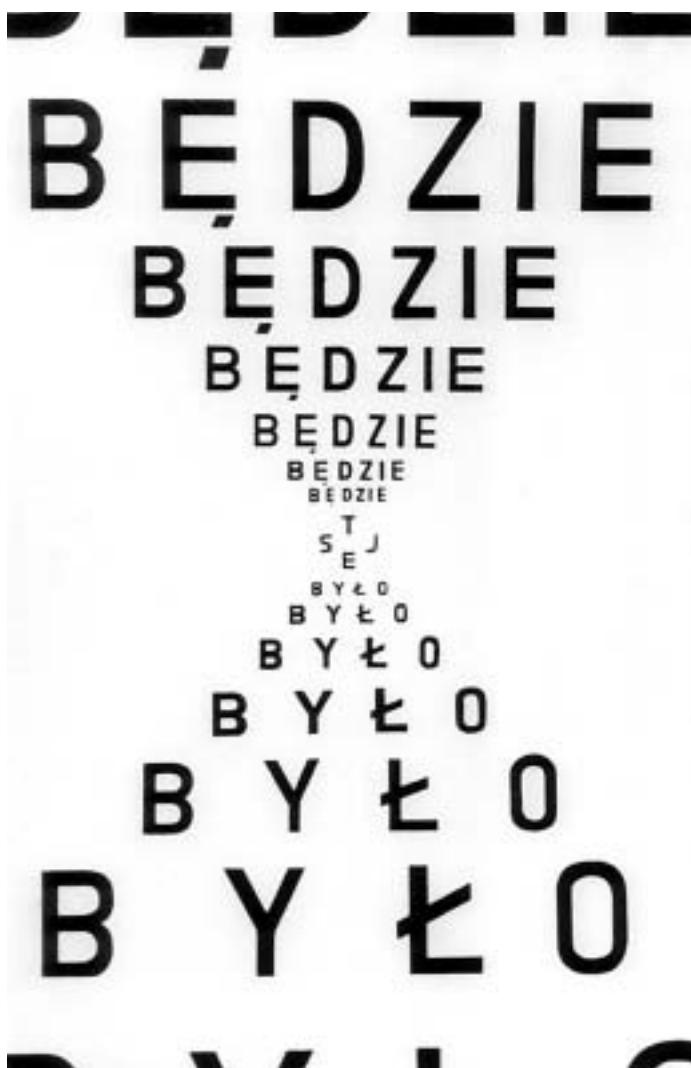
of tensions resulting from the juxtaposition of ordinary objects within the unusual – for them – space. While the logic of this strategy gave the object a meta-artistic character, transforming it into a theoretical statement about art, institutions, performance and so forth, Matuszewski's 21 *Objects* were aimed at the viewer's imagination; they forced him to read them sensually. The artist achieved this function by actively participating in the selection of the objects. Their choice was not accidental, though the artist tried to emulate an accident. These were not 'found objects' that revealed ideas hidden within the subconscious, but rather 'recruited objects', subjected to the artist's will and composed into a work within the gallery space. Moreover, they were standardized through a contemptuous, iconoclastic act of painting. Every one was painted red by the artist.

In another work executed a year later, a happening entitled *Process*, Matuszewski performed a type of objectification of iconographic motives taken from European art. He did not do this within the visual space of the canvas but in the real space of the gallery and with the participation of the audience. The artists rendered the key topoi of oil painting: nudes, still lifes, genre scenes. Exhibited in enclosed boxes in which the artist drilled small holes, as if for a peep-show, they were turned into ready-made objects intended for consumption, just like the chickens served and eaten during the opening. The viewers were brought down to that level. Provoked by the artists, they became the material, which he manipulated in order to eliminate painting, the canonized European object, and with it the Modernist art culture.<sup>40</sup>

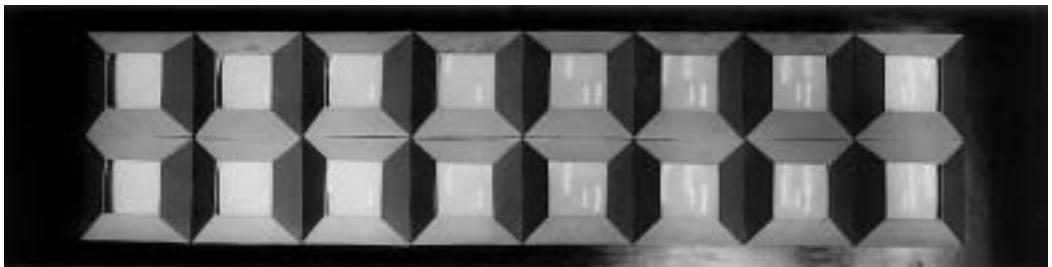
An assortment of project and exhibition proposals by Stanisław Dróżdż from the late 1960s, collectively entitled *Concept-forms* (illus. 94), also constituted a radical break with painting, its discourse, status, metaphysical function and visual nature. The work consisted of a set of boards marked with particular words, visualization of which completed their meaning (the name of the project refers to this aspect of the work). In a certain sense, one could interpret this work within the context of 'concrete poetry'; however, unlike concrete poems, which used text to create a visual image, Dróżdż's *Concept-forms* produced a visual effect by invoking the meaning of the words. As a consequence of this paradox, it was not the image or visuality, however conceptualized, but the word that functioned as an instrument of a critique of art. But the meaning of the words was comprehended by the viewer according to a visual order. The displayed sentences were suspended between visuality and language, viewing and reading. They could be viewed, although they did not possess a visual 'quality', and could not be subjected to an aesthetic description. But they were also not 'literary' in a traditional sense of the term. They violated literature's intimacy, as well as the material and spatial neutrality of the text. Words filled

the gallery; they demanded surface, space and a certain materiality. At the same time, their meaning was situated in a different dimension from visuality – at the juncture between art and poetry.

In 1966 the work of another Polish artist, Jerzy Rosołowicz, underwent changes that led him to completely forego painting. This was neither a brutal nor a sudden break, but, as notes Barbara Baworowska, it was quite clear.<sup>41</sup> Rosołowicz developed the idea of a neutral action. As he explained in his manifesto from 1967, ‘self-conscious neutral action is an action undertaken by a human being that brings him neither a gain nor a loss. It is an opposite



94. Stanisław Dróżdż,  
*Hourglass (It  
will be – it was),*  
1971.



of a goal-oriented action as well as its complement'.<sup>42</sup> Grzegorz Sztabiński interprets the artist's work on two levels. On the one hand, the work attempts to neutralize the negative effects of civilization. On the other, it performs functions that are disinterested, do not serve any purpose, and as such cannot be used for anything good or evil.<sup>43</sup> According to the artist, human actions, even when they have good intentions, are often used for harmful purposes. Only those actions that are neutral *a priori* can maintain a certain type of ethical purity. This ethical motivation is very important here, as the earlier cited commentators emphasize. In this context, art appears as a form of a utopia or rather as an example of a utopian 'struggle against evil' by the mean of 'aimless' and therefore neutral action.

However, analysing Rosołowicz's work, we can see not only ethical, but also critical features. His *Double-sided Reliefs*, created in the second half of the 1960s, consist of lenses attached to frames (illus. 95). The resulting object was permanent, thoroughly material, having a specific consistency, weight, dimension, appearance and so on, but it was also, one could say, 'neutral' vis-à-vis the environment, autonomous and independent. However, the image created by it (the reality seen through the lens) was always dynamic (it registered the street traffic, movement of the visitors at the exhibition, and so on). One could say that the artist brought into question the Modernist dichotomy between the object and the space, the aesthetics and the reality, the representation and the presentation. Next, he replaced actual, realized works with utopian project proposals, downright absurd in their neutrality. In 1967 he created *Neutrordome* (illus. 96), a proposal for an enormous construction consisting of a upside-down cone and an accompanying sphere. It was an ironic take on the engineering utopias that are generally created with a certain 'goal' in mind. In this instance, the utopian or 'impossible' construction had no purpose; its only function, if one could call it that, was to allow the viewer to perceive light, darkness and space while travelling in a lift inside the cone. At the top, on an enormous terrace, the experience of sound and light was supposed to be as neutral as it was inside the lift or the sphere. Rosołowicz's next project, equally

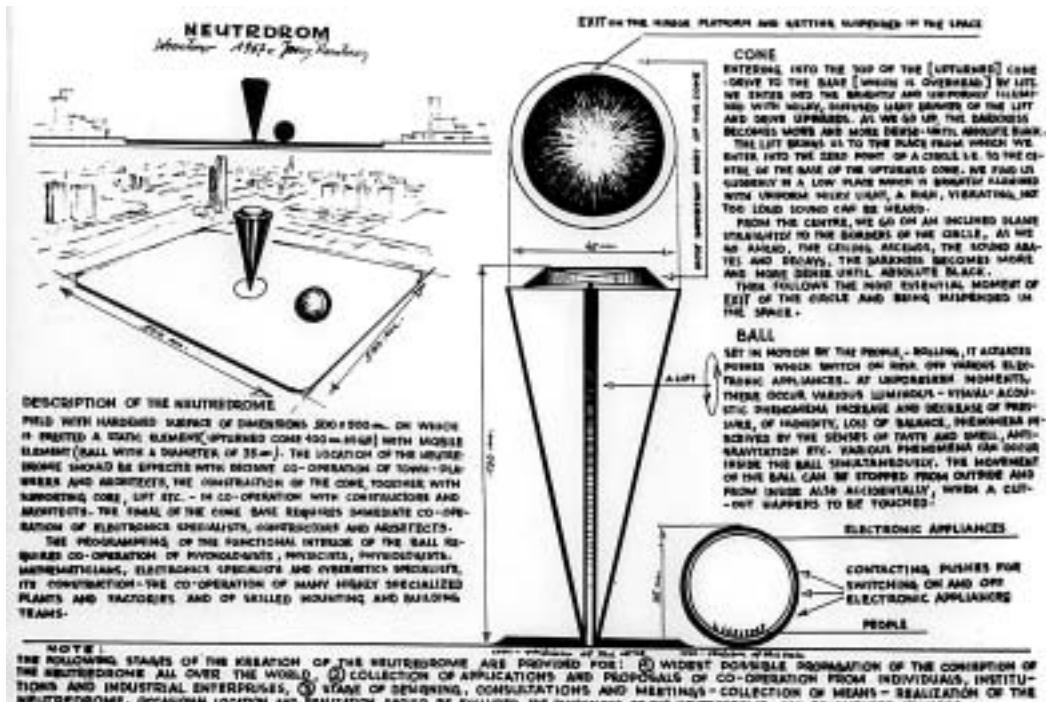
95. Jerzy Rosołowicz,  
*Horizontal Double-Sided Relief*, 1968.  
National Museum,  
Poznań.

utopian and absurd, but, above all, totally neutral, was called *Creatorium of Millenium Stalagmatic Columns* (illus. 97). This was a proposal for a machine that would create a stalagmite and a stalactite at the rate of one millimetre per year by draining water through a filter filled with calcium carbonate. Over one thousand years, the instrument would produce a column one metre long.

From a perspective of conceptual and 'impossible' art, the meaning of Rosołowicz's works from the late 1960s and the early 1970s appears quite clear. The artist questions the universe of Modernist art values, from its ideology to aesthetics. However, it should be stressed that his 'geometric' arrangements of lenses in *Double-sided Reliefs* or engineered *Gesamtkunstwerk* touched, among other issues, the Constructivist tradition and, more broadly, culture based on technological and scientific utopias of progress of which Constructivism was an expression. At the same time, just like Borowski's works, those by Rosołowicz undermined the image-based aesthetic and the 'official' hierarchy of artistic values.

96. Jerzy  
Rosołowicz,  
*Neutrordom*,  
1967. National  
Museum,  
Wrocław.

Returning to Kantor, it is worth noting that his often radical critique of painting was above all original and unique in the above-stated context. It was based not so much in the artist's experience with painting but with theatre. Kantor began developing his critical apparatus during the war through his



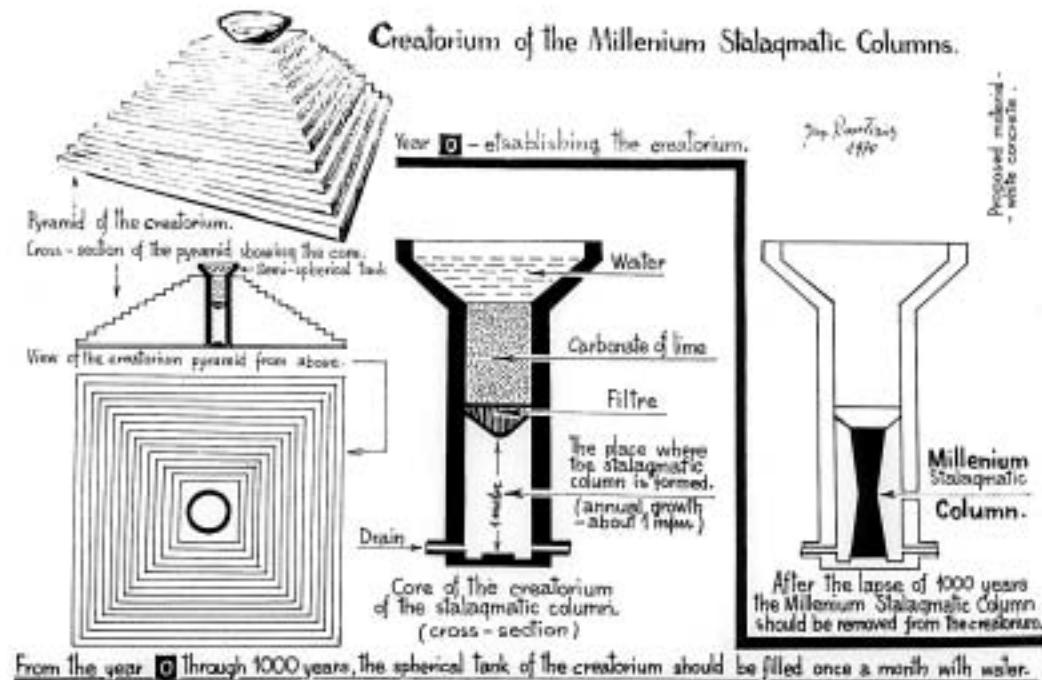
NOTE: THE FOLLOWING STAGES OF THE CREATION OF THE NEUTRORDOME ARE PROVIDED FOR: ① WIDEST POSSIBLE PROPAGATION OF THE CONCEPT OF THE NEUTRORDOME ALL OVER THE WORLD, ② COLLECTION OF APPLICATIONS AND PROPOSALS OF CO-OPERATION FROM INDIVIDUALS, INSTITUTIONS AND INDUSTRIAL ENTERPRISES, ③ STATE OF SEMINARS, CONSULTATIONS AND MEETINGS - COLLECTION OF MEANS - REALIZATION OF THE NEUTRORDOME. OCCUPATIONAL LOCATION AND REALIZATION SHOULD BE EXCLUDED - THE DIMENSIONS OF THE NEUTRORDOME CAN BE AMENDED UPWARDS.

experience with the underground theatre, especially the production of the play *Return of Odysseus* (1944). Performances of the play, which took place in private apartments on improvised stages, sometimes quite near the Wehrmacht's barracks, included along with the human actors a series of objects: 'a rotten plank of wood, a rusted wire, a cartwheel covered in mud, dusty old packages, an authentic military uniform'.<sup>44</sup> One could say that in Kantor's wartime theatre the stage was reified, deprived of illusionism, saturated with a reality that equalled that which existed beyond the theatre's walls. In fact, one of the unrealized proposals for the staging of the *Return of Odysseus* consisted of a complete transfer of art (the play) into the domain of reality. Kantor wrote,

we considered the following option for staging *Odysseus*, to move the whole thing into a train station . . . What we had in mind was that Odysseus returning from the ancient, pathos driven and 'geometric' reality would enter the train station, with its dirt [and] chaos; he would mingle among people who do not care about his case, who are indifferent to his fate, actions and adventures, who simply sit in their dirty vests, hats pulled over their eyes, surrounded by luggage and suitcases; he would simply enter real life.<sup>45</sup>

In a different statement, comparing this performance with earlier, more

97. Jerzy Rosołowicz,  
Creatorium of  
the Millennium  
Stalagmatic  
Columns, 1970.  
National  
Museum,  
Wrocław.



'theatrical' presentations, Kantor observed that Odysseus had to actually return, and that is why the main protagonist of the play (played by the painter Tadeusz Brzozowski) was wearing a military helmet and Wehrmacht uniform, as if he were a soldier returning from the disastrous siege of Stalingrad.<sup>46</sup>

This reification of art, the conception of the object (reality) as a critique of painting (illusionism) grew out of Kantor's artistic experiences during the war and under the influence or, at least in the context of, current events.<sup>47</sup> However, this attitude was not consistent since the artist repeatedly returned to painting and, one could even say, embraced a particular mythology of painting, creating a rich and diverse body of works, from the Surrealist canvases produced in the late 1940s to *Art informel* in the 1950s and figurative painting in the 1970s and '80s. A comparison of Kantor's work with that of the Yugoslav artist Mangelos reveals an interesting dimension of the Polish artist's attitude. It is certain that Kantor was not familiar with Mangelos's works since almost no one knew about them. Both artists were, however, deeply rooted in the war experience of the 1940s; for both, the revision of art and its mythology began during this period of terror, death and humiliation. Both artists believed that the modern-Modernist understanding of art as a sublimation of the autonomous function of the artist had to be rejected as it faced the reality and the crisis of speech, concepts, words, conventions and narration. For both, their critique was motivated by existential considerations. However, that is where the similarities end. Aside from the fact that Kantor never entirely abandoned painting while Mangelos never really practised it, Kantor's attitude is full of pathos, what he described as 'a reality of a lower order', 'poor' objects that invaded the stage and were filled with pathos, drama and poetry. By contrast, Mangelos was a minimalist. Calmly, patiently, slowly but consistently he tracked the fundamental contradiction of representation (as in *Tabula Rasa*), questioning its invulnerability. He worked in silence, almost in secret, on the margins of not only world art history but also Yugoslav art history. In contrast, Kantor was incapable of working in secret. He demanded attention, an audience and applause. Even when he stubbornly repeated that he functioned on the margins of culture, in reality, he never considered the possibility that he could actually find himself there; he had to be in the centre and in the mainstream of history.

The critique of painting carried out by Polish and Yugoslav artists functioned within a clearly defined art-historic terrain. It referred to Modernist painting, especially *Art informel*, so popular in both countries in the second half of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s. Even Kantor, fully entangled in *Art informel* as one of its leading figures, referenced it in his *Popular Exhibition* of 1963. However, in the countries where Modernism followed

different paths and where there was no ‘mass mobilization’ associated with *Art informel*, the critique of painting and object-art developed within a different system of references. This was especially true in Hungary, where the cultural history of post-war modern art traced a path shaped by the 1956 Budapest uprising, the terror that followed in its wake, and the years of repressions directed against culture. Here the liberalization of cultural policies occurred very slowly but steadily. The Hungarian art scene, governed by the political doctrine known as ‘3 × T’ (Túrni, Tiltani, Támogatni – Tolerate, Prohibit, Support), was opening to Modernism in the 1960s at a time when ‘modern’ signified something quite different than it did in Poland in the preceding decade, not to mention Yugoslavia, which much earlier abandoned Stalinist



98. Krisztián  
Frey, 318o,  
1966.  
Hungarian  
National  
Gallery,  
Budapest.

cultural policies. I am referring, of course, to Pop art, with which Hungarian artists became familiar in the West in the mid-1960s<sup>48</sup> and which, as the first wave of cultural modernization, began to heal the wounds inflicted by the Budapest uprising.

Perhaps for that reason, one can see what could be termed a complex of *Art informel* in Hungarian art of this period. For instance, Endre Tót's paintings from the mid-1960s balanced precariously between *Art informel* and its critique (exemplified in the artist's use of scraps of reality, such as fragments of text, newspapers and photographs).<sup>49</sup> The same tension can be seen in the works of Krisztián Frey. According to Éva Rothman Gelencsér, the author of a major monograph on the artist, his paintings, to which he refers as *pictographs*, are suspended between a symbol and an abstraction.<sup>50</sup> This description can certainly be applied to Frey's painting 3180 (illus. 98) and to his *Shoes* (1969), a work that carries a German inscription, 'Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis', that speaks to the universalist ambitions of the work (illus. 99). Although the juxtaposition of objects (in the first case, female underwear, to be more precise a slip; in the second also female shoes) with the painterly approach recalls *Art informel* paintings, it also points to a tension between the image and the object, the craft of painting and the materiality of things, the culture of the image and the everyday material culture. Perhaps one of the Hungarian art historians who discussed Frey's work was correct when he



99. Krisztián Frey, *Shoes: Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis*, 1969.  
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest.



observed that ‘the fetishism of the female undergarments revealed in the paintings refers equally to consumerism as well as “the eternal female”’.<sup>51</sup> However, I tend to believe that the problematic explored by Frey in his works deals much more with art issues (reification of the image as a response to the crisis of painterly representation) than with the metaphysics of gender.

The interest in Pop art in Hungary was motivated by a desire to modernize culture and to participate in worldwide contemporary art. That is where one should seek explanations for the popularity of commodity iconography among painters such as Gyula Konkoly, for example in his *La Maison des anges* (illus. 79) and *Ugarragu* (illus. 100). The work of this artist attests to the presence of the complex of *Art informel* in Hungarian Pop art perhaps even more emphatically than the work of Endre Tót or Frey. These two paintings are marked by a tension between the iconography of mass culture and the practice of painting, autonomy of paint, and the draw of that tradition. This tension is even more visible in the artist’s object-based works. The mere shift from a painting to an object carries within it an element of critique of painting as a tradition. It signals the influence of this type of attitude, by then very popular in the West. However, those objects are by no means ready-mades. This type of art will appear here as well, though perhaps somewhat later, in

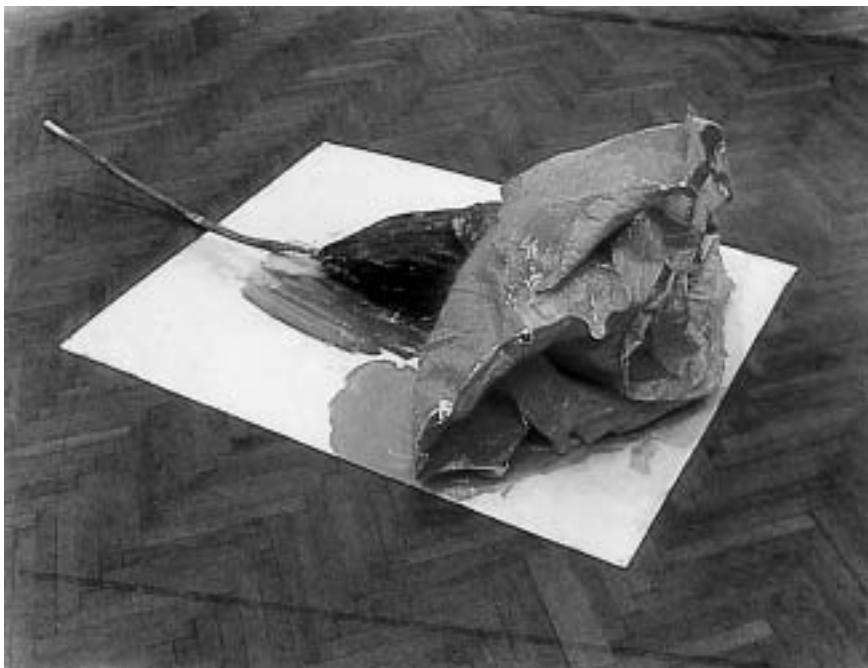
100. Gyula Konkoly,  
*Ugarragu*, 1965.

101. Gyula  
Konkoly,  
*The Cage.*  
An Academic  
Study, 1968.  
Múzeum  
Kiscell,  
Budapest.



102. Gyula  
Konkoly,  
*Soft Boiled*  
*Egg*, 1968.  
Hungarian  
National  
Gallery,  
Budapest.





103. Gyula Konkoly, *A Rose Speaks more Beautifully*. István Király Múzeum, Székesfehérvár.

the context of the neo-avant-garde of the 1970s, although one could find isolated object-based works in the 1960s among the art of Tamás Szentjóby or László Szlávics.<sup>52</sup> Konkoly's works consisted of 'created' objects, produced by the artist and, moreover, painted in a manner that recalls the emotional surfaces of *Art informel* (*The Cage: Academic Study*, illus. 101; *Soft Boiled Egg*, illus. 102; *A Rose Speaks more Beautifully*, illus. 103). Because of this tension, Konkoly's work resembles, to a certain extent, the works of Robert Rauschenberg and the soft objects of Claes Oldenburg.<sup>53</sup> But it points as much to a crisis of painting as to a need for it, a need for respect for its privileged status within the social hierarchy.

This nostalgic attitude has its sources in the history of Hungarian culture. The neo-Stalinist regime of Janos Kadar (a leader who, paradoxically, was later responsible for 'goulash socialism') had a low regard for art. The Socrealist politicization of art, which deprived it of its autonomy, was in place in Hungary for a much longer period than in Poland or Yugoslavia. Its persistence created an environment that encouraged defence of painting rather than its critique. Konkoly may have engaged in what appears to be a critique of painting based in Pop art, but he did so in order to forge a connection with the global contemporary art. He did not accept the premise of such critique or its cultural theory. If in the West, painting, in particular Modernist painting, was associated with

the hierarchy of culture, dominance of high culture, elitism and disregard for everyday reality, then in Hungary the opposite was the case. Those values, subjected to criticism in the West, acquired positive meaning against the political context of the Communists' efforts to bring culture down to its lowest denominator.

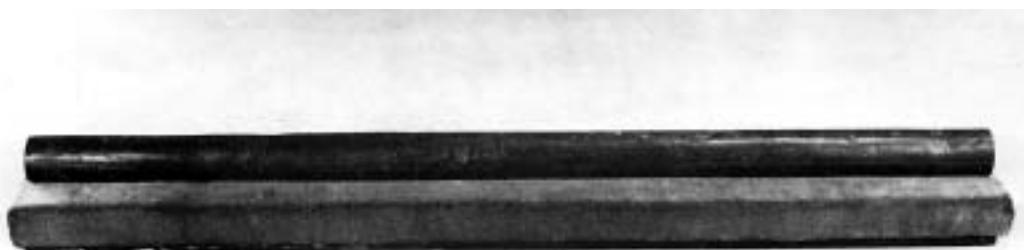
The critique of painting simply could not be consistent with the Western models in a country starved of Modernist culture in the 1960s. The interest in the object and its play with the conventions and values of painting has here a very different meaning from that which it had in the art of Oldenburg, Rauschenberg or Andy Warhol. Writing about the latter, Arthur Danto observed that his work, especially his *Brillo Boxes*, signalled the end of history and the end of art. The work stops referring to reality; it becomes a reality unto itself. There is no discernable formal difference between Warhol's work and a 'real' Brillo box. They look the same. This type of work signals the end of certain analytic categories based, according to the tradition of art history, in visual experience and formal analysis. Moreover, Warhol's work announces the beginning of the post-historic age, since it abandons narration and metaphor. The future, according to Danto, is post-narrative. It rejects the narrative description of reality because it itself becomes the reality.<sup>54</sup> Yet, in Eastern Europe it is difficult, indeed, to speak of the end of history, since the notion of an end always brings to mind Communism, understood within the Marxist-Leninist ideology as the final stage of historic development. Moreover, the 'creative' element, clearly visible in the earlier mentioned examples, always determines the status of the work and always 'distinguishes' it from the reality. The latter always functions as a point of reference for art and not as its replacement. Finally, one can 'still' see in it the element of Modernist narration and of metaphoric meanings that contain political subtexts.

I do not intend to suggest that in the 1960s in Hungary there were no neo-avant-garde tendencies. This was the time when different generations within the Hungarian avant-garde met and their clash gave raise to new forms of art.<sup>55</sup> This was particularly true of happenings. The first Hungarian happening was organized and executed by Gábor Altoray and Tamás Szentjóby, with the participation of Miklósa Erdély, the leading figure of the local neo-avant-garde scene. It took place in Erdély's apartment and was entitled *Lunch – In Memory of Batu Khan*.<sup>56</sup> The reference to the legendary Tatar chieftain naturally did not bear any relation to the happening itself, which was organized (or disorganized) through various 'meaningless' actions: writing of letters on the floor, a crib on fire, chasing a chicken and so forth. Later, towards the end of the same year, at the same location in a happening entitled *Golden Sunday* (taking place during the 'golden Sunday' before Christmas), Erdély shouted

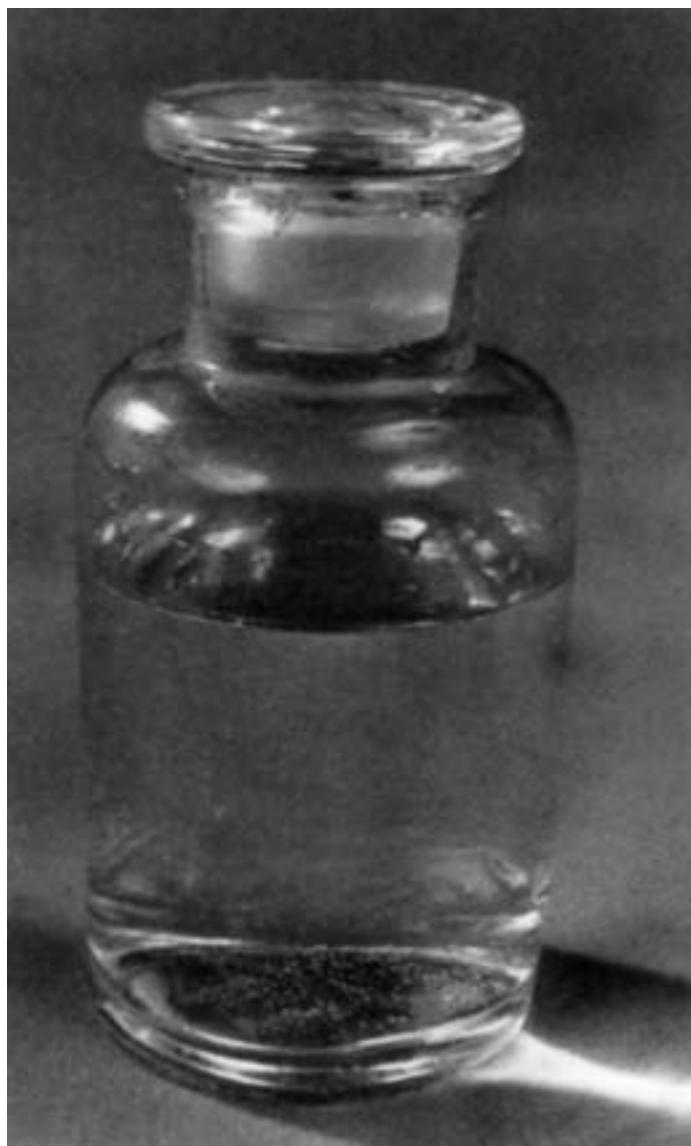
through a megaphone to the gathered participants (who included among others Altoray and Szentjóby), 'Get out of here', while they attached a meteorological balloon to the wall, and bread and a piece of beef to a previously set-up mannequin. In 1968 Erdély performed *Three Quarks for King Mark*, which consisted of a montage of various simple actions. All those events can be connected with the general atmosphere of Fluxus concerts. One such small-scale concert took place in Budapest in 1969. Tamás Szentjóby participated in it; Erdély screened a film, *Hidden Parameters*, which he had produced a year earlier and which consisted of 'found' film segments.<sup>57</sup>

Towards the end of 1968, the exhibition *IPARTEV*, organized by Péter Sinkovits, opened in offices occupied by an architectural firm. Its name came from the acronym of their host. The exhibition did not last long. After a few days, it was closed by the authorities, a fact that reveals a great deal about the tensions that surrounded contemporary art in Budapest. Moreover, the show was not particularly radical, especially if one considers what had already taken place in the city. The walls of the exhibition space were covered with more or less modern paintings, more or less, even by Hungarian standards, conservative, more or less abstract, somewhat geometric, somewhat figurative, somewhat Expressionist. However, a year later when the same curator organized another exhibition under the same name, its content was quite different and a different group of artists was featured. Miklós Erdély showed objects he used in his happenings. Gyula Konkoly included a work entitled *Monument* (1969), which consisted of a piece of ice painted red, which in its thawing left behind a red puddle that resembled blood. Tamás Szentjóby showed two pieces, *A New Unit of Measure*, originally created in 1965, which consisted of a lead pipe (illus. 104), and *Cooling Water* from 1968, which consisted of a jar filled with some water (illus. 105). Both works had clear political connotations, typical for the artist, especially in the context of 1968 and the events in Czechoslovakia. The water in a jar was warmed every twenty minutes and allowed to cool. According to Géza Parneczky, this work

104. Tamás Szentjóby,  
*A New Unit of Measurement*,  
1965.



105. Tamás Szentjóby,  
*Cooling Water*,  
1968.



referred to the cycles of political ‘thaws’ familiar from East European history.<sup>58</sup>

Independently of those associations, Szentjóby’s works as well as Erdély’s piece *Last Year’s Snow* (illus. 106), consisting of an ‘ordinary’ thermos and a vase of flowers, referenced the tradition of Duchamp. However, during this period, Szentjóby more and more frequently reached for political metaphors. In 1968 he created a work entitled *Portable Trench for Three Persons* (illus. 107), which in a way was similar to another work created that year,

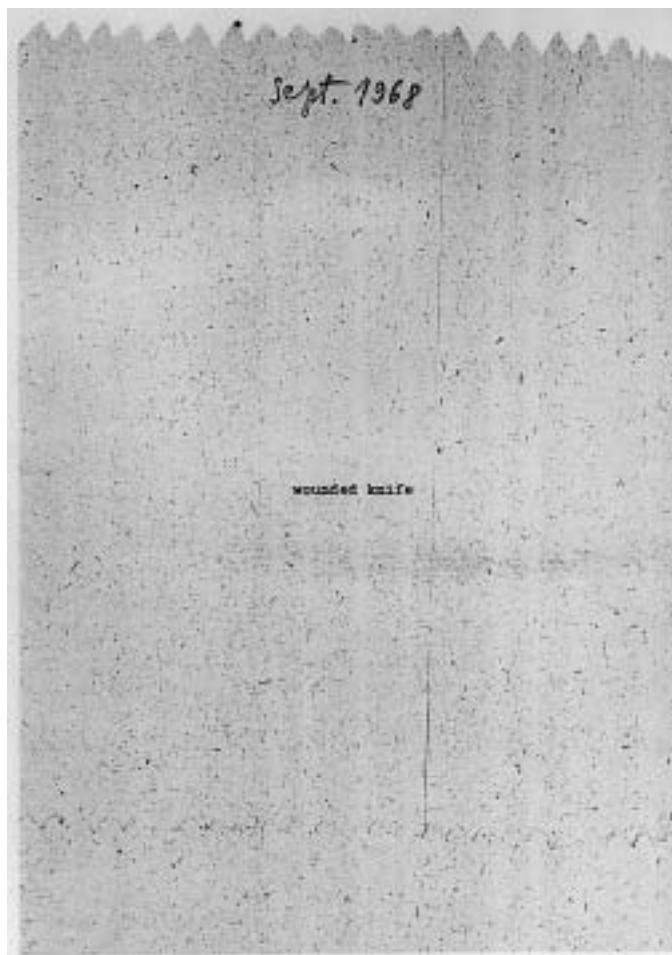
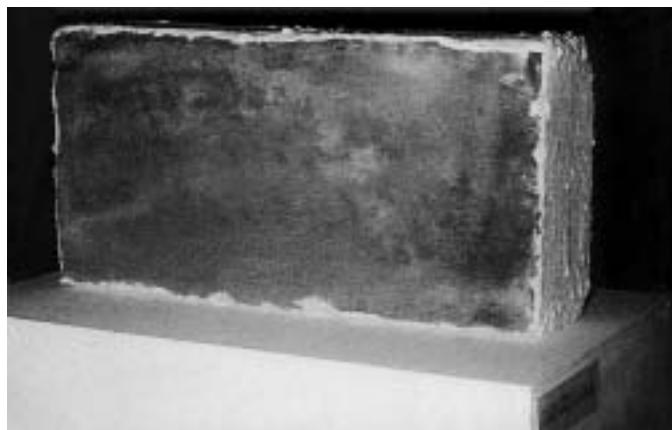
106. Miklós Erdély, *Last Year's Snow*, 1970.  
Miklós Erdély Foundation, Budapest.



107. Tamás Szentjóby, *Portable Trench for Three Persons*, 1968.  
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest.



108. Tamás  
Szentjóby,  
Czechoslovak  
Radio, 1968.



109. László  
Lakner,  
*Wounded Knife*,  
1968.

*Czechoslovak Radio*, which consisted of a brick and made references to the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the countries of the Warsaw Pact (illus. 108). In general, it must be stressed that Hungarian neo-avant-garde artists were the only representatives of that tendency in Eastern Europe who expressed solidarity with Czechoslovakia. This was probably linked to the politicization of the local art community, which was stronger than elsewhere in the region, a subject to which I will return later. In addition to Szentjóby, it is worth mentioning the economical, one could even say minimal, but also unusually poetic project by László Lakner dedicated to the Prague Spring entitled *Wounded Knife* (illus. 109). The work consisted of a piece of paper with the handwritten phrase: ‘Sept. 1968’ at the top and ‘wounded knife’ typed in the middle.

The histories of the East European countries encounter one another during this period in an extraordinary way. The second *IPARTEV* exhibition inaugurates a very dynamic and interesting period in Hungarian art. Szentjóby’s political works, produced in reaction to the suppression of the Prague Spring, are its first signs. In Czechoslovakia, on the other hand, the opposite process gets under way. After the suppression of the Prague Spring, in 1970 begins the so-called period of normalization or reactionary political repression. Culture is one of its most important targets. Of course, art does not disappear; it continues to develop but on a much less spectacular scale, less dynamically, often in the underground, in struggle with the bureaucracy, on the margins of public life. The art practice in Hungary during the 1970s, inaugurated by the *IPARTEV II* exhibition, slowly moves to the surface, gains hardness and develops; art practice in Czechoslovakia during the same period sometimes resembles a conspiracy. I will embark on a comparative study of the East European neo-avant-garde of the 1970s in another book, but I wish to signal here the existence of this geographic tension.

Czechoslovak art falls victim to normalization during the 1970s, a fact that becomes more poignant when one considers its dynamic development during the 1960s. The 1970s were for Hungarians and their art what the 1960s were for Czechs and Slovaks. The 1960s were a golden period of Czechoslovak art, perhaps the most interesting and dynamic phase of its post-1945 history, and as such are comparable to the interwar period. One of its more interesting aspects is the chronological overlay of Modernist and anti-Modernist attitudes. In the first half of the 1960s there was a simultaneous development of *Art informel* painting and of work growing out of the critique of painting: object- and action-based art. In 1956 Jiří Toman took a photograph of the number ‘1956’ written in the snow and sent it out as a New Year’s greetings card. The date of this action is very significant since it reveals that Czechoslovak artists

were thinking in terms of a critique of painting even before they fully embraced Modernist *Art informel* painting at the end of the decade.<sup>59</sup> Naturally, those types of actions which were critical of the exhibition system and art galleries as well as of the Modernist conception of painting had a long tradition in Czechoslovakia that reached into the late 1940s. I am referring to the work of Vladimir Boudník, the author of 'explosionism', who searched for 'painterly values' on the streets, on the peeling building facades, who invited passers-by to annex fragments of those walls as their own art works. This was certainly an instance of institutional critique of the art system, as well as a critique of the mythology of painting that stressed its pathos, elitism and autonomy. Yet it also anticipated Czech performance art of the 1960s, which is difficult to contain under the rubric of 'happening'.<sup>60</sup>

Conceptual art appeared in Czechoslovakia, especially in Slovakia, earlier, and formulated a far-reaching critique of painting. Slovakia represents a special case of a synchronic convergence of movements that appeared in a chronological order in the West. At the moment when Bratislava Confrontations were taking place throughout the city in various private studios, the beginnings of the neo-avant-garde critique of painting were also already apparent.<sup>61</sup> The Confrontations manifested the growing popularity of Modernist painting in Slovakia, a region that did not have a home-grown tradition of Modernist painting based in Surrealism.<sup>62</sup> In 1964, during the fourth Confrontations, Július Koller, one of the most radical Slovak artists, whose work early on



110. Július  
Koller, *Sea*,  
1963–4.

111. Július Koller,  
*Question Mark*,  
1969.



explored the territory of conceptual art, ‘painted’ a painting (or more accurately ‘wrote’ a painting) consisting solely of a word ‘more’ (*Sea*, 1963–4; illus. 110). The word announced the subject of his ‘painting’ to be a seascape. However, instead of a rational representation of the visible reality, one saw (read) only a simple word: ‘more’. The manner of the word’s inscription was equally significant, since it implied a critique of the practice of painting. The word was hand painted, using light paint on a dark background. One could see typical features of *Art informel* painting: drips of pigment, visible brushwork, traces of the artist’s gesture. Koller’s painting, just like abstract paintings, did not represent the reality; it did, however, ‘speak’ about it, while the viewer read the word ‘more’.

This semantic transformation of the canvas and its peculiar conversion into a text contains a poignant critique of painting. It is, however, a mischievous

critique, since it introduces a tension between the painterly gesture and the act of writing. The artist activates the tension between the work of art and reality, rejecting the self-referential character of Modernist painting and thereby questioning one of the most basic myths of Modernism. Throughout the 1960s Koller progressively developed this critique. In 1963 he created *Dada Mask*, which consisted of a surface thickly covered with paint on which the artist handwrote a text that proclaimed his rejection of the painterly approach to painting. He later produced 'anti-happenings' and 'anti-paintings'. His first work in this series, *Painting Game* (1967) consisted of a white paint stain, complete with drips, 'spilled' on a rust-red background. In another piece, entitled *Question Mark* (illus. 111), Koller painted a white question mark against a red background and 'exhibited' the work by attaching it like a flag to a shower pipe at the local public swimming pool. His *Slovak Painting* (1968) consisted entirely of continuous lines repeating the words 'słowackiobrazsłowacki' (slovakpaintingslovak), as if into infinity. This, of course, creates a tautology, an identification of the description and the image, accomplished, however, by the means identified with painting (paint) and text (words). In the work *Culture of Debris* (1967–70), the artist exhibited jars filled with paint and other objects used in painting, the debris of painting referred to in the title. He omitted, however, the painting itself.

Koller's 'anti-happenings', performed on the tennis courts in Bratislava in 1968, are also interesting. In his performances, which combined elements of happening and painting, the artist repainted the lines that defined the structure of the tennis court, marking its borders and divisions. In that gesture one can find a critical reference to another form of Modernist practice, namely neo-Constructivism, since the surface of the court was 'painted' according to a geometric model. Towards the end of the decade, Koller sent out various 'anti-

112. Július Koller,  
nedoroz-  
UMENIE, 1971.



art' and 'anti-information' announcements, which sometimes involved complicated puns: *Not-invitation for Not-exhibition* (1969), *nedorozumenie* (a play on the words 'nedorozumenie' (misunderstanding) and 'umení' (art) (illus. 112), and *NIČ* [Neoficiálna Informácia o Časopriestore] (illus. 113). The acronym *NIČ*, whose full name, translated, is 'Unofficial Information about Time-Space', means *nothing* in Czech. He also engaged in similar actions in the mid-1960s, when he sent out information about 'anti-happenings' (described as 'subjective objectivity'), in which he only included the name of the country: Czechoslovakia. In the series of photographs entitled *Ufonauts J.K.* (1970), the artist engaged in an ironic commentary on the mass psychosis of society that crossed national boundaries. He photographed himself with ping-pong balls bearing the word 'UFO' (Universal Futurological Operations) stuck in his



113. Július Koller,  
*NIČ [Unofficial  
Information  
about Time-  
Space]*, 1971.

mouth and behind his eyeglasses, looking into a ping-pong paddle as if it were a mirror. In a number of photographs documenting this action, the back of the paddle bears a question mark. Those ‘anti-happenings’, as well as Koller’s actions based in what he called ‘the system of subjective objectivity’, reveal an attitude that aims to erase boundaries between different art tendencies (art and anti-art, Modernist and neo-avant-garde painting), between different forms of neo-avant-garde practice (performance, conceptual art, Fluxus), and, above all, between art and life. Those actions, which take up the basic problematic of 1960s art widely explored at the time in Czechoslovakia, express an ironic attitude towards both life and art.

The radicalization of Slovak art in the 1960s is certainly worth attention as a phenomenon, especially since Koller was not the only artist who engaged in the critique of painting within the dynamic art environment of Bratislava. Peter Bartoš, whose works had a more sensual and less conceptual character, took a similar approach. In the piece *Tempéra* (1966), he smeared a broken egg on the surface of a ‘painting’, in an ironic reference to *Art informel*. Later, the artist moved more assuredly in the direction of conceptual art, stressing, however, the interactive character of his work. For instance, in a series of street actions, he painted black lines in snow. Their ideal, ‘Constructivist’ form was then gradually destroyed by the passing pedestrians.

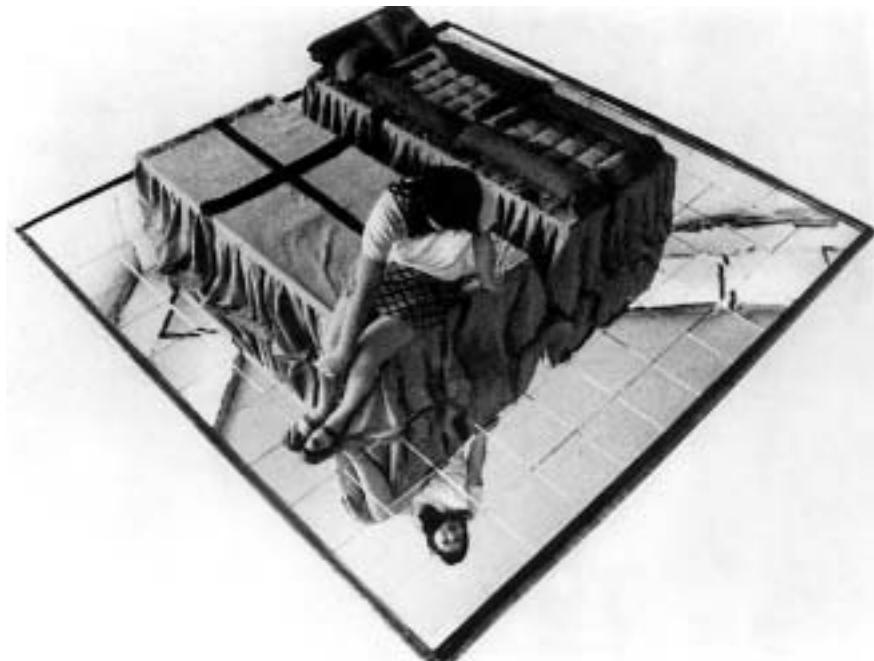
The conceptual tendencies were becoming increasingly popular in Bratislava and were more clearly visible there than in Prague. It is worth noting in this context the contrast between the radical character of the Slovak neo-avant-garde and the conservative historic background of Slovak art. The visual arts did not have as rich a tradition here as in the neighbouring Prague. Radislav Matuščík links the radicalization of the Bratislava art scene to its ‘self-impoverishment’, to a search for ‘poor art’ that rejected a tradition of art filled with pathos and sanctified in museums and exhibition halls, which at this time were almost entirely under state control.<sup>63</sup> Aurel Hrabušický (somewhat ironically) adds, that a tendency to embrace reductivism in art was not a reaction against the richness, exuberance or decadence of Modernism, but rather the result of a general scarcity that was one of the endemic conditions of Slovak culture.<sup>64</sup> If he is correct, then this ‘scarcity’ certainly produced a treasure-trove of Slovak neo-avant-garde projects.

In general, the shift from mythologized painting to a real, ready-made object can certainly be seen as a component of the critique of painting. In Slovakia such objects began appearing with the introduction of Pop art. Pop became almost as popular here as in the neighbouring Hungary, though it was largely absent in the GDR, Poland and Romania. Classic forms of Pop art, especially the appropriation of ready-made objects and, to a lesser degree,

ready-made iconography, mixed in Slovakia with the influences of French new realism. The latter was popularized in Czechoslovakia by Pierre Restany, who maintained active contacts with the local artists.

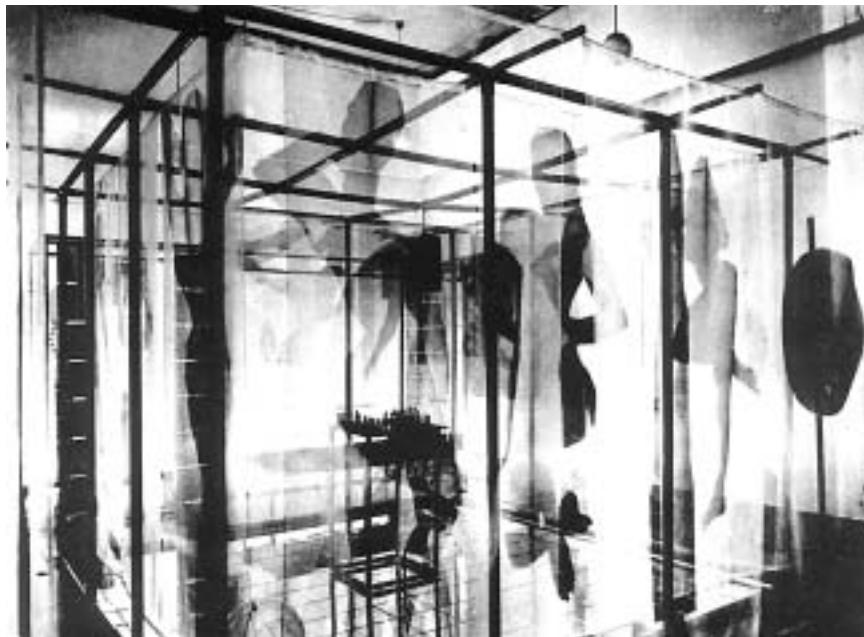
Stano Filko, one of the more interesting figures associated with those tendencies, persistently attempted to formulate an alternative to a Modernist painting (co-existing with Pop) in his work.<sup>65</sup> In the second half of the 1960s the artist began using maps as ready-made objects, onto which he then transferred female figures of a clearly erotic character (*Map of the World*, 1967). Those types of works gathered together features of disparate art tendencies, relying on pre-existing elements such as objects, letters, words and so forth. Works of another Slovak artist, Miloš Urbásek, developed in that direction as well. His paintings consisted of surfaces covered by fragments of text (hand-written, typed or taken from a newspaper) onto which the artist transferred single, large letters. Rudolf Sikora also used maps in the late 1960s to create diagrams (for instance, ironic *Diagrams of Good and Evil*, 1969).

Filko, however, went much further towards radicalization of the critique of painting. Between 1965 and 1966 he created an environment, *A Room of Love* (illus. 114), which was later shown at the famous *New Sensibility* (Nová Citlivost) exhibition held in Prague in 1968.<sup>66</sup> The artist placed two beds covered with sheets, each bearing a Latin cross on the mirrored floor. On top of one bed there was an air mattress; on the other sat a girl. In 1967 Filko



114. Stano Filko,  
*A Room of Love*, 1965–6.

115. Stano Filko,  
*Universal  
Environment*,  
1967.



created another installation called *Universal Environment* (illus. 115), which was supposed to create a certain psycho-physical synthesis between the artist's work and the viewer's participation through the simultaneous use of different media.<sup>67</sup> The installation consisted of billowing draperies on which the artist painted eroticized female silhouettes familiar from his *Map of the World*. In the middle of the space he placed a table with a chessboard, a slide projector, two illuminated globes and an air mattress with an image of a resting woman. The mirror disrupted the appearance of the physical space, creating the impression that the objects and the visitors were suspended in mid-air. The latter became not only the viewers of Filko's work but also his medium, part of the installation. Their presence and experiences, caused by the appearance of the space and by various stimuli (slide projections, the effects created by the mirrored floor, painted draperies and so on), constituted an element of a broader strategy aimed at transgression of boundaries of the work of art, boundaries determined by the art's tradition and cultivated within contemporary Czechoslovak Modernist painting. This breaking of the work's frame took place in the name of contemporaneity and its technological possibilities, in the name of creating a 'totality', a complete and universal experience, with the goal of connecting all means of expression. The artist also created other environments of this type. For instance, his *Humanist Cathedral* (1968) could be seen as a mutation of the earlier work, since here too the artist

116. Stano Filko,  
*Association*  
XVII, 1968-9.



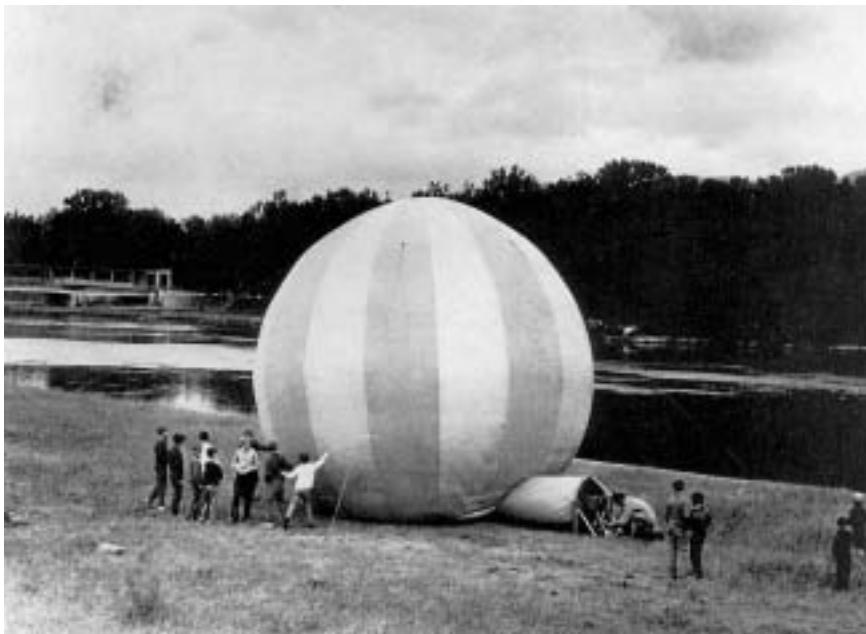
used a mirrored floor that allowed viewers to look at themselves 'upside-down'. He also installed slide projectors and radios that projected photos of the surrounding reality of this important year. This work provides evidence of the clearly political character of Filko's projects.<sup>68</sup>

Filko eventually moved from spatial installations to the production of conceptual statements of cosmological significance. In the series *Associations*, the artist explored the issue of the unity of the world and the relationship of its constituent parts. The diagram *Association XVII* (illus. 116) provided the most eloquent and the most general outline of the artist's cosmological conception. In the four corners there are texts referring to the four elements (earth, water, fire and air); in the middle Filko included the word 'man' as the fifth element of his cosmology. The whole is surrounded by the text 'cosmos/universe'. The text of the diagram was created in many languages: Slovak, French, English, Italian, German and Latin, a fact that emphasizes the work's universal references. This work did not end Filko's cosmological explorations. In 1968, he built *Cosmos*, a spatial construction or an environment, consisting of a domed tent, the cosmos itself (illus. 117).

Alex Mlynářčík, another Slovak artist, also rejected the painted canvas in favour of the ready-made object. His close relationship with Pierre Restany enabled him to have several exhibitions in Paris and popularized his work abroad. Those contacts were based on their mutual interest in the critique of

Modernist painting. Mlynářčík created actions which he called ‘permanent manifestations’. One of those, entitled *Temptation*, was created with Miloš Urbásek at the Paris Galerie Raymonde Cazenave in 1967. The installation-exhibition consisted of store mannequins (ready-made objects) arranged by Mlynářčík and displayed against Urbásek’s ‘paintings’, which were stencilled directly on the wall. Urbásek’s ‘paintings’ provided the ‘art’ reference for the fully dressed mannequins, which were moved directly into the gallery space, and without any intervention by the artist, from the window display of a clothing store.

Restany situated the exhibition within the context of ‘commercial folklore’,<sup>69</sup> a phenomenon that remained in the sphere of desires rather than concrete reality in Czechoslovakia, and especially in the less prosperous Slovakia. However, in Paris ‘commercial folklore’ was perceived as a part of everyday reality. This slippage in the references is rather significant, since it reveals the existence of a certain parallax of meanings. The original context of the work, connected with the impoverishment of reality and lack of consumer goods in Czechoslovakia, linked it with different meanings than those which were attributed to it in Paris, a city saturated with consumer goods. In other words, ‘commercial folklore’, the iconosphere of the Parisian streets, shop windows selling clothing and other consumer goods, which functioned as a point of departure for Mlynářčík’s work, meant something quite different in



117. Stano Filko,  
*Cosmos*, 1968.

Paris than it did in Bratislava. In the first instance, it signified real and routine consumption; in the second, a certain nostalgia for an excess of consumer goods and a desire for a state where one could become bored with them. This may sound strange, but the object of desire was not just the availability of consumer goods, but rather a habituation to excessive consumption, which signified for East European artists a 'normal' or 'Western' lifestyle. Poverty gave rise not only to a desire for satisfaction, but also to a need for excessive satiation with consumer culture, which functioned as the source of modern Western art, perceived in the East as modern art *par excellence*.

One could interpret Mlynářčík's installation *Villa dei misteri*, created the same year in Lund, in a similar way (illus. 118). It consisted of a labyrinth filled



118 Alex  
Mlynářčík,  
*Villa dei  
misteri*, 1967.

with images of partly naked models appropriated as ready-mades from the iconography of consumer culture. Two years later, at the Paris Biennale, with the help of friends and other artists, Mlynářčík assembled 2,430 different objects. He was in a way repeating Kantor's installation at the Krzysztofory Gallery in 1963, and referenced the then popular art of *les nouveaux réalistes* associated with Restany, which used 'accumulation' of objects as one of its methods. One of its most spectacular examples was Arman's 1960s exhibition, entitled 'Full', which took place at the gallery of Iris Clert. However, there are significant differences between Mlynářčík's and Arman's works. The latter 'accumulated' random and nameless objects in a specified space; Mlynářčík gathered objects he received as gifts from friends. The identity of each object was defined by its provenance. The selection made by a particular person took away the object's anonymity. Of course, the enormous number of objects undermined their individual identity; however, it could not entirely eliminate it either for the artist or for those who gave him the objects. One could say that this work exemplified the 'flip side' of *le nouveau réalisme*. It did not so much reveal a fascination with the multitude of useless objects, flotsam and jetsam of consumer culture, the 'poetry of a trash heap', as an effort to personalize them, define them in a poetic form in the context of selection made by a specific individual. This shift of emphasis seems very important, since it demonstrates that the critique of the Modernist painting undertaken by artists from the Restany circle was determined by specific cultural factors, namely references to a new reality defined by the excess of goods. In contrast, Mlynářčík was interested in man's role within that environment and individualization of a single person's relationship with objects. The Slovak artist operated within a humanist attitude which rejected the mythology of Modernist painting, but not the culture that created it.

The attitude of the French *nouveaux réalistes* was fundamentally anti-humanist, based in a radical conviction that the object, rather than the man, was the central focus of the contemporary world. The inhabitants of Eastern Europe did not want to agree with that claim. It would be difficult to trace general causes for this difference; it must be noted, however, that one of them could have been the need for universal humanism, which was being undermined by the pseudo-humanist ideology of the so-called 'socialist humanism', which embraced the model of *homo sovieticus*. Humanism, which was associated in the West with the veiling of the system of power, was seen in the East as a strategy of resistance against the anti-humanism of the Communist regimes. In this context, self-inscription into a universally defined idea of humanism functioned as a sign of opposition against Communist particularization and instrumentalization as well as radical Western reism.

Earlier, in 1966, on the occasion of the international congress of AICA, which took place in Prague and Bratislava, Mlynářčík created another ‘permanent manifestation’, which he placed in a public toilet in the centre of Bratislava, with mirrors bearing inscriptions that referred to famous artists: Hieronymus Bosch, Michelangelo Pistoletto, as well as his friend Stano Filko. He also included the term: ‘ $\text{CO}(\text{NH}_2)$ ’ – the chemical formula for urea.<sup>70</sup> The installation had a musical component in the form of Johann Strauss the elder’s *Radetzky March* and a comment book for those who visited the toilet and encountered the installation. The Communist authorities were shaken by the artist’s selection of the location. This confirmed the appropriateness of the artist’s strategy vis-à-vis high culture. The police confiscated the installation and began an investigation that included evaluations of the author’s state of mind by experts from the fields of sociology and psychology. Mlynářčík’s radicalism, which rejected museum-bound painting in favour of an installation in a public toilet, certainly revealed the presence of a consistently critical approach. This type of work was at the time much closer to reality than museum work, which unexpectedly received support from the Slovak police. Their involvement confirmed the existence of a relationship between museum-based art and the system of power (here the Communist regime) much closer than one would have expected. It also confirmed the uncertainty of status of any radical critique, not only that which operated within the political rhetorical field.

The selection of a public toilet as a location for an art intervention also points to the conscious ‘self-impoverishment’ of Slovak art I discussed earlier. ‘Poor art’ was created in the context of that reality. It was the ‘flip side’ of the



119. Alex Mlynářčík (collaboration with Anton Cimermann and Viera Mecková), Akustikon, 1969.

architectonic utopias proposed by Czechs as well as Slovaks,<sup>71</sup> of projected architectural dreams which should be considered more in the context of impossible or project art than architecture. This type of production defined the context of Mlynářčík's *Akustikon* from 1969 (collaborators: Anton Cimmermann and Viera Mecková) (illus. 119), a utopian project for an enormous egg-shaped object suspended above the city, the only function of which was to emit sounds produced by the guests moving along the spiral. The object was supposed to function simultaneously as a concert hall and an instrument, a total work of art, in which creation of sound was identified with its reception. It resembled Rosołowicz's *Neutrdom*, produced two years earlier, though it was devoid of the pathos and moralizing subtext present in the Polish artist's work.

On 1 May 1965 Stano Filko, Alex Mlynářčík and the art historian Zita Kostrová published their *Manifesto of 'Happsoc'*, bearing the subtitle 'What is happsoc?'.<sup>72</sup> The manifesto declared that man had to begin to perceive mundane, 'naked' reality in a more complex way. It called for individuals to immerse themselves immediately and without mediation or stylization in that reality, to open their existence to their environment, but to promote this type of engagement without any coercion. The name 'happsoc', which came from the combination of two words, 'happening' and 'society', seemed to advocate a communal, 'social' happening. In reality, however, 'happsoc' was not a happening at all; in fact, it went against many principles of happening. The Slovak artists did not create performances or actions as such, but simply opened themselves to the reality, annexing it *in totem* as a work of art. Writing about 'happsoc', Restany invoked Duchamp's work and the artist's idea of the 'immersion' of art in the environment, his drive to create for the sake of creating.<sup>73</sup> In *Happsoc 1*, the objective of the so-called 'art action' was not to create an artwork as such but to appropriate the entire surrounding reality of Bratislava. The work's boundaries were determined by a particular span of time: 1–8 May 1965. The timing of this total and conceptual 'action' gave the work a subversive character, since its duration coincided with the official, solemn celebrations of May Day in Bratislava and throughout the Communist world. The May Day parades, which included the highest ranks of the party and state leadership, became part of the artwork. The documentation of *Happsoc 1*, which was subsequently published, listed 'precisely' all the elements comprising the work: the number of women (138,936) and men (128,727), dogs (49,991), houses (18,009), apartments (64,725), washers (35,060), refrigerators (17,534), street lamps (142,090), the amount of used water (delivered to apartments: 40,070 litres, removed from apartments: 944 litres), used tulips (1,000,801), and so forth.<sup>74</sup> The critique of Modernist painting implicit in



*Happsoc I*, of the autonomous, museum-bound object, was total and radical, perhaps the most radical in Eastern Europe in the 1960s. According to Radislav Matuškík, this work did not move towards a self-referential theory of art, commonly found in conceptual art, but rather, in keeping with the general atmosphere in Czechoslovakia at the time, in the direction of a merger and total 'braking down of barriers' between art and reality. The subsequent *Happsoc*s had a similar character, though perhaps they took place on a smaller scale and were more conceptual in character. The documentation of *7 Days of Creation: 25.12.1965–31.12.1965 (Happsoc II)* (illus. 120) consisted of seven pieces of paper, each referring to a single day of 'creating life'. It included minimal information: a ticket to a striptease performance in Paris, words: 'na stanici / à la gare', or 'PF'. In *Happsoc III*, the artists announced an invitation to a 'world-wide action' that was supposed to take place in Czechoslovakia and consist of living 'here and now'. *Happsoc IV* (1968) took place beyond the borders of Czechoslovakia. It took on a cosmic dimension, since it consisted of an invitation written in several languages over an image of a space rocket: '1968 69-70-71 and further years takes the liberty to invite you for a TRAVEL IN SPACE mental and physical Everybody according to his possibilities and faculties' (original English text).<sup>75</sup>

In the neighbouring Czech area, the art processes implicated in the critique of painting had a somewhat different dynamic. They were linked to Milan Knižák's work from the early 1960s. In general, they focused much more on performance art than on conceptual art.<sup>76</sup> Conceptual art developed only to a slight degree in the Czech territories over the next two decades. The work of J. H. Kocman provides one of the few classic examples of this type of work in the 1970s.<sup>77</sup> In 1962 Milan Knižák created two highly original site-specific installations: *Mariánské Lázně* and *Nový Svět* (both titles refer to districts in the Prague old town). The performance was quite simple: the artist

120. Stano Filko,  
*7 Days of  
Creation:  
25.12.1965–  
31.12.1965  
(Happsoc II)*.

'threw out' different, more or less damaged objects of everyday use onto the street. Despite this apparent 'simplicity', the piece had a radical meaning. The artist's critique was directed against painting, more precisely *Art informel*, which he himself had been practising for some time.<sup>78</sup>

Knižák not only rejected painting, but the whole sphere of culture that surrounded it. It is worth noting the double significance of this action, connected with the local culture of Czechoslovakia. Although the critique was certainly directed against official art, that was not its sole target. At this time, *Art informel* was a very popular form of unofficial art, generally understood as a form of a critique of official Socrealist painting. By directing his critique towards an unofficial aesthetics model, Knižák went much further than his competitors. He moved towards completely liberating the performance of art from any limiting frames. He was thereby continuing the tradition begun in the 1940s by Boudník, whose manifesto of 'explosionism' and street actions encouraged passers-by to annex visually appealing fragments of buildings as their 'own' art. Connecting art with the environment, substituting random objects for paintings, the street for a gallery or a museum, passing pedestrians for the art audience, Knižák exited both the 'official' and the 'unofficial' art scene. His total rejection of art was its total critique; it was a rebellion against anything that limited freedom of action, including aesthetics and art classifications.

Knižák's definition of art was unlike anything that Czechs had seen up to this point or understood as art. This, however, posed a serious problem. A complete merger of art and reality could lead to the elimination of its signifying character. In other words, if everything could be art, then an individual (the artist) would lose the ability to denote and to realize his or her freedom, the main goal and value of Knižák's work. The artist intended, after all, to provide an alternative to both art (official and unofficial) as well as life. One could say that he was seeking an alternative lifestyle. Conscious of that objective, in 1964 he staged *One-Man Demonstration*, which clearly presented such an alternative. The performance took place on a crowded Prague street. All of a sudden, the artist stopped in the midst of a crowd of pedestrians. He took off his coat revealing a striking jacket, half-green, half-red. Then he spread a cardboard mat on the pavement, lay down and began reading a book. As he read, he tore out pages and threw them away.

When one compares this performance with the earlier ones, one major difference becomes readily apparent. In the earlier pieces, the trash-objects strewn during the performance were completely at home in the environment of the street. In this instance, however, a strangely dressed man laying on the pavement and reading a book was not something one would have expected to

find on a Prague street. The artist's unusual outfit and behaviour was meant to attract attention and it certainly did. Knižak introduced here a distinction between art and not-art, as well as daily life and its alternative. Not-art was separated from art, but also this different form of life from daily life.

Embracing this method, the artist could realize his project of the total alternative to life and art. Those experiences provided a foundation for work of the collective 'Actual Art' [Aktuální umění], formed by Knižak in 1964, and after 1966 known as Aktual. The group's manifesto, published in the first issue of the journal *Tvár* in 1965, stated:

We are not interested in esthetic norms serving as measuring stick for perfection. We are interested in a man. In order to overcome his cynicism and sentimental indifference, so typical in a today man, we are using, we must use, the most fully functioning forms. And thus: NATURALISM, BANALITIES, MAXIMALISM, PROVOCATION, PERVERSION etc. TO SHOCK, TO FASCINATE, TO EXPOSE NERVES, TO PERSUADE, MAXIMALLY PERSUADE, DESTROY THE PLEASANT ART TICKLING. The production of pictures and sculptures for interior spaces, the sentimental wailing on the concert halls' stages are no longer necessary.<sup>79</sup>

A year earlier, the group staged an action entitled *Actual Walk along Novy Svět – Demonstration for All Senses*, which anticipated its manifesto. The members and the invited guests took a walk around Novy Svět, a famous area of Prague's old town, then a bit run down and much less frequently visited than it is today (illus. 121). Every so often they would come across an unusual scene: rags hanging from a lamp post, a double-bass player laying down on the street, various 'incidental' objects familiar from Knižak's earlier works and so forth.<sup>80</sup> This type of action, directed against the official (but not only) culture, against the meaninglessness of daily existence and conventions of 'normal' behaviour, was political, as was everything else within the totalitarian political system, but it also had an explicit political significance. Knižak later observed that because Czech artists were critical of the politicization of art by the Communists after 1948, they themselves looked for an 'alternative', rather for a political programme as such.

Although their 'alternative' practice did not produce many directly political statements, this does not mean that one should ignore its political significance. It is this context that distinguishes Czech art (and more broadly East European art) of the 1960s from its Western counterpart, which was often directly political in content and created within the context of the leftist worldview.<sup>81</sup> Jindřich Chalupecký and other commentators on Czech post-war art agree with the thesis that the difference between Czech neo-avant-garde and Western neo-avant-garde can be attributed to the former's preference for

121. Milan Knižak, *Actual Walk along Novy Svět – Demonstration for All Senses*, Prague, 1964.



indirect political expression and creation of an alternative to the official, ‘bureaucratic’ art.<sup>82</sup>

Aktual was not the only art group seeking alternative forms of functioning, though it is the best known, largely thanks to Knižak and his international reputation (among others his relationship with Fluxus). One should also mention here a collective, Križovnická Škola (Križovnicka School), which in the mid-1960s began meeting at the restaurant ‘U Križovníku’, and later at ‘U Svitáku’. Their ‘actions’ consisted of meetings, excursions and long hours spent at a bar drinking beer. In one such action, *Beer in Art* (1972), the drink even became the main protagonist of the art event.<sup>83</sup>

Eugen Brikcius was another exceptional individual associated with the Czech art scene of the 1960s. However, the development of his work had a somewhat different trajectory from Knižak's. It did not develop from experiences in visual arts, but in literature, theatre and philosophy.<sup>84</sup> Brikcius's main interest in happening was an outcome of a desire to transform a word into a body, enacting a type of materialization or embodiment of the language. Nevertheless, as the artist himself later noted, this type of expectation could not be realized. The word could not be eliminated; it persisted in happening as directions and later as documentation.<sup>85</sup> It was also impossible to eliminate politics, even though Brikcius's performances did not deal with political subjects. In one of his earliest happenings, *Thanksgiving* (1967), a group of people offered bread to a selected person waiting for a tram. Unexpectedly, the bread was spoiled and the happening led to a police intervention (in defence of fresh bread) that ended with the artist's arrest.<sup>86</sup> He was released after a week and pronounced innocent by the court, which acknowledged the fact that the street event was in fact a 'work of art'.

This reaction clearly indicates that the Czechoslovak justice system treated art with a great deal of respect. An explanation that one dealt with a 'work of art' apparently excused any (or at least some) forms of behaviour that could not be accounted for or tolerated within the Marxists' understanding of the everyday reality. The destruction of the bread was an accident. In general,



122. Eugen Brikcius, Still Live I, Prague 1967.

accidents played a significant role in Brikcius's art. The same year, he organized a happening, *Still Live 1* (illus. 122), during which beer poured into mugs was supposed to become, according to the artist's expectations, an object of aesthetic contemplation and experience. The nice weather was supposed to enhance the experience. Although the weather report promised snow, the sun was supposed to come out later in the day. The artist counted on the fact that the light reflected in the mugs of light beer placed on white snow would become an object of aesthetic contemplation. But there was no snow, no sun, only rain. In reality, the happening focused on the rain puddles. The participants were supposed to observe them until they dried up. Meanwhile the beer was consumed by a dog, a fact that was recorded in many photographs of the event.

It is largely irrelevant whether the happening focused on the beer or the puddles. What is important is the artist's aesthetic motivation. However, in this instance, aesthetics must be understood in a very different institutional and functional context than in relation to museum objects. The aesthetic element of Brikcius's work was supposed to be unconscious. It was not supposed to be a result of choice, but of unconscious processes applied to a common experience. Moreover, it did not involve an act of creation, since no one composed the puddles or arranged the potential reflections of light in the mugs of beer.<sup>87</sup>

Every event mentioned above is marked by a certain fondness for the 'natural' and an undeniable sense of humour. Those characteristics can be also found in Zorka Ságlová's outdoor works as well as in her famous exhibition *Hay*, which took place in the Václav Špála Gallery in Prague in 1969 (illus. 123). For the exhibition, the artist arranged a delivery of hay, which was then formed into a large haystack. The artist's friends and members of the audience were allowed to play in the hay during the show. The use of a natural material, treated in a light-hearted manner, contained, in and of itself, elements of a critique of Modernism, which were by then well known in Czechoslovakia. What is significant, however, is the fact that the event took place in a gallery. While the work questioned the tradition of painting, it did not directly challenge its institutional support system, as was the case in Knižák's and Brikcius's work. It did, however, undermine its status by filling the gallery with hay and thereby comparing it to a barn.

Karel Srp often brings up Knižák's letter from 1967 cited by Chalupecký, in which the artist writes about self-immolation or crucifixion at the Václavské náměstí as a gesture of iconoclasm.<sup>88</sup> However, the reality surpassed the artist's imagination. Two years later, on 16 January 1969, Jan Palach burned himself to death not far from that location. This was not an art gesture and the stakes

were completely different. The meaning of Palach's action was determined by much broader references than a critique of painting. It was a gesture of despair and extreme determination, a real act, not a mythical one, to use Roland Barthes' terms. This act was performed within the domain of actual reality, rather than the symbolic one invoked in Knižák's projects. Barthes observed: 'It is because it generates speech which is fully, that is to say initially and finally, political, and not, like myth, speech which is initially political and finally natural, that Revolution excludes myth'.<sup>89</sup> Such was the nature of the Czechoslovak revolution and the Prague Spring; such was also the character of Jan Palach's suicide.

Barthes embraces, however, another intellectual illusion. Palach's act, though certainly real and not mythical, was 'just' a flash, a moment during which reality could be glimpsed through the discourse of mythology. A revolution likewise is a glimmer, a moment that cannot be captured or preserved. It



123. Zorka Ságlová, *Hay*, 1969. Galerie Václava Špály, Prague.

is very quickly ‘stolen away’ by parasitic mythology. Even its inspirations are stolen, as we have seen, in Knižák’s mythologized projects. Palach’s self-immolation did not defend Czechoslovakia. Paradoxically, however, thanks to the myth it allowed it to defend its identity. This outcome was secured not only by artists and dissident intellectuals, but also, and once again paradoxically, by the regime’s spokesmen. Perhaps, then, there is no escape from the myth and the faith in ‘true’ rather than mythical language is no more than an expression of the intellectuals’ longing for something that is presumed to exist outside the language, their *nomen omen*, or mythology of revolution. Beyond the language, in ‘reality’ there is only the naked fact of the death. Taken over by the language of culture, that fact ceases to be naked, it is penetrated by the myth. This fate awaited the Prague Spring as well as Jan Palach’s act of self-immolation.

I do not wish to ponder any further Barthes’ illusions or those of intellectuals who believe in revolution, and thereby reveal their fundamental trust in mythology. The problem that must be addressed has to do with the function of those forms of protest, their role in performance and discourses of social practice. In such context, there is little doubt as to the role played by the events of the Prague Spring. Much the same could be said with regards to the East European neo-avant-garde of the 1960s. One should pay particular attention to the two links connecting the critique of painting and the art culture of the period. The critique of culture connected with state institutions functioned as one of those links. The other one was created by the simultaneous critique of the unofficial culture created outside those institutions. In this respect, the history of Polish and especially Yugoslav art is not typical, since in those two countries one can see a form of institutionalization of Modernist painting and hence simplification of the situation. In those countries the neo-avant-garde practice appears as an outcome of processes that aim to problematize reality, but also those processes are chronological in character. In other words, neo-avant-garde critique has a diachronic character; it is a reaction against earlier institutionalization of Modernism.

In other countries, especially in Czechoslovakia, this process has a much more interesting quality since it takes place across a synchronic plane. Here neo-avant-garde artists engage in *total* critique of painting, regardless of its location within institutional cultural landscape; they perceive the danger in its very existence. Because painting relies on the mythology of autonomy, hierarchy, elitism, and special technique, it poses a threat to liberty and freedom of expression. Painting as such, irrespective of whether it functions within the context of an official state-run exhibition venue or a private studio, makes it impossible to cross the boundaries of art and life, and only appears to break conventions. Precisely because it is painting, it is entangled in the conventions

and limits of art. The critique of painting undertaken in Czechoslovakia had deep roots in theory, though perhaps was more intuitively than systematically expressed. In the first place, that theoretical foundation addressed the condition of the painted canvas, and to a lesser extent (as in Poland or Yugoslavia) its function.

In the early 1970s, when Czechoslovakia underwent the process of ‘normalization’, a new chapter in the history of East European art began. During this period the neo-avant-garde began to function in a completely different historic context. Regardless of whether the events of the late 1960s and the early ’70s moved towards greater restrictions on the freedom of artistic expression (Czechoslovakia) or towards liberalization (the majority of countries in the region), the post-Stalinist phase had come to an end. A new period, described by the future president of free Czechoslovakia (later the Czech Republic) as post-totalitarianism, was beginning.<sup>90</sup> This period of so-called ‘real socialism’ fundamentally changed the context in which both art and culture would function in this part of Europe.



Part 3

# The Neo-avant-garde and ‘Real Socialism’ in the 1970s





## 7

## Mapping the Neo-avant-garde, c. 1970

At the very beginning of the 1970s, Klaus Groh published in Germany an anthology on the East European neo-avant-garde art.<sup>1</sup> This was one of the first attempts to map the neo-avant-garde as a distinct trend in this region of Europe. Although the volume did not provide any groundbreaking contributions to the interpretation and analysis of the neo-avant-garde work, it functioned as an important introduction to artists of the region. Its importance rested in the fact that it was the first publication to approach this part of Europe as a whole at a time when – even inside the region – Eastern Europe was not viewed as a distinct and defined territory. This geographic way of thinking was associated here exclusively with the political system based in the Communist ideology that was rejected (more passively than actively) by the majority of the local population. The local artists viewed themselves in universal, rather than regional, categories.<sup>2</sup> This perception of their own practice gave them a sense of being a part of the global art culture. It also functioned as a form of a compensation for their isolation. For many, the regional perspective was simply unacceptable since it resembled too closely the reality of the Warsaw Pact.

Groh's book was, however, well received, not because it could not have been written in the East, but rather because it was written and published in the West. In addition to the prestige conferred on the featured artists, the book represented the West, a mirror in which the artists of the 'other' Europe liked to see themselves. They believed that the West would verify their evaluative criteria and confirm the value of art created on the other side of the Iron Curtain. This way of thinking revealed a certain paradox. On the one hand, everyone involved was aware that the context in which the work was created was quite specific and, therefore, so were its meanings. On the other hand, no one wanted to consider the issue of art's geography or the consequences of a

particular geographic location. There was an unconscious feeling that adoption of a regional geographic perspective would solidify the division of Europe and confirm the existence of the Iron Curtain. The popularity of Groh's book was paradoxical precisely because the book functioned within the geographic paradigm. It focused exclusively on the contemporary art produced in that part of Europe which it characterized simply as 'Eastern'. In other words, it did not incorporate the discussion of the East European countries into the discussion of Europe as a whole.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, it clearly elevated the prestige of the local art scene by publicizing information about the East in the West among those, to use Milan Kundera's words, 'whom we love'.<sup>4</sup> There was an attempt to see a symptom of a shift in attitudes in Groh's interest.

Perhaps the greatest value of Groh's book from a historic perspective rests in the fact that the author was one of the first to notice the events taking place around 1970 that were changing the character of art in the region. A new, dynamic form of art practice, the neo-avant-garde, was taking shape. Of course, Groh was not alone in observing those processes. East European artists were becoming more visible and active on the international art scene. Everyone sought contacts abroad, trying to ignore the reality of international borders and political divisions. Meanwhile, the authorities not only did not encourage such interactions, but often attempted to discourage them, viewing all private efforts taking place outside the official bureaucratic channels with suspicion, especially those operating within the international arena. This held true not only for contacts with the West (something to be expected in the context of the late Cold War), but also, and above all, for contacts within the countries of the Eastern Bloc. The authorities, who wished to maintain a monopoly on all contacts and exchanges within the Bloc, protected their turf, fearing a loss of control. Their behaviour was dictated in part by the principles of totalitarian government and in part by pragmatic considerations. The Communist regimes, aware of significant differences in the economic as well as the political situation among the Socialist countries, feared that unrestrained access to information about those differences could affect the stability of the system as a whole.

International exchanges, including those limited to the Eastern Bloc, did take place, however, despite difficulties posed by the Communist authorities. One of those was the 1971 project NET, aimed at the international exchange of information. It was organized by Andrzej Kostołowski, a Polish art historian, and Jarosław Kozłowski, a Polish artist, both based in Poznań (illus. 124). Briger Mesch noted that NET was 'the first, non-commercial, free, international art exchange'.<sup>5</sup> The Gallery Akumulatory 2, founded and directed by Jarosław Kozłowski in Poznań, continued and solidified those principles. It functioned as an international venue that not only transgressed international borders but

# NET

124. Andrzej Kostołowski and Jarosław Kozłowski, NET, 1972.

SZCZ /NET/

- SIEDZIEĆ jest pośmietycyjne, ale nie  
- tworzą ją zasadniczo prywatne, prowadzone i tase miejsce,  
 w których pojawią się propozycje artystki
- propozycja te kierowane są do osób zaistniewanych
- tworzące się wydarzenia, które formą jest dwie  
 /rehearsal, happening, druzi, talk, film, happening, fotografie, video itp./
- SIEDZIEĆ nie ma punktu centralnego i poświatka jest  
 konceptualny
- punkty SIEDZIEĆ znajdują się w różnych miejscach i kraju
- między poszczególnymi punktami istnieje kontynuitat pole-  
 gający na zmianie koncepcji, projektów, aspektów i innych  
 atrakcji, które to wydają sensu i ich równoległa  
 prezentacja we wszystkich punktach
- Siedziba SIEDZIEĆ nie jest nowa, w momencie istnienia  
 prezentuje byd autentyczne
- SIEDZIEĆ może być dowolnie wykorzystywana i powielana

Jarosław Kozłowski  
Andrzej Kostołowski

also attempted to avoid engendering a hierarchical perception of geography. It hosted Western and Eastern European artists: Carlfriedrich Claus, László Lakner and Jiří Valoch, among others. At the beginning of the 1970s János Brendel, a Hungarian art historian living in Poznań, played a key role in organizing one of the first (if not the first) exhibitions abroad of contemporary Hungarian art produced by artists associated with the alternative art scene. It took place at the Poznań municipal art gallery, BWA.<sup>6</sup> Another much more visible Polish venue interested in international neo-avant-garde art was the Warsaw Foksal Gallery, which also organized an exhibition of Hungarian neo-avant-garde art, featuring, among others, works by Miklós Erdély. The Warsaw Gallery Remont was likewise active in this area. For instance, in 1976 it hosted performances by three Czech artists, Jan Mlčoch, Karel Miler and Petr Štembera. The Polish map of international East European contacts and exchanges also includes the active art and museum centres of Wrocław, Lublin (Gallery Labyrinth) and Łódź.

The situation in Poland in the 1970s was unique with respect to the possibilities of organizing exhibitions of neo-avant-garde art as well as

engaging in international exchanges. Because of that, the country was often visited by artists and intellectuals from the other East European states. László Beke recalled his hitchhiking trips through Poland as one of the key factors that shaped his intellectual education.<sup>7</sup> Jiří Valoch also mentioned Poland in a similar context of intellectual tourism. During the period when Czechoslovak authorities made travel to the West virtually impossible, Poland, along with the other East European countries (Valoch also mentions Hungary and, notably, the GDR), functioned as a certain type of a substitute for the access to the international art scene.<sup>8</sup> And that is precisely how this situation should be understood. This view is confirmed by the artists and intellectuals from the former GDR who, in order to develop contacts with the West, travelled East to Poland. Paul Kaiser and Claudia Petzold, the curators of the exhibition *Boheme und Diktatur in der DDR* and the authors of the accompanying catalogue, wrote that German artists found in Poland Western books, pop music records, jazz festivals, international art exhibitions (sometimes of a considerable world reputation, such as the Kraków Biennale of Graphic Arts), bookstores and libraries with literature banned in the GDR, international film festivals and presentations of Western films at places such as the Łódź Film School. The curators also stressed that it was here, while hitchhiking through this neighbouring Eastern Bloc country, located just the other side of the Oder River, that German artists smoked 'grass' for the first time.<sup>9</sup>

The East European artists' participation in exhibitions organized in Poland functioned at times as a substitute for participation in the international (that is, Western) art scene. Robert Rehfeldt, one of the first GDR artists involved in mail-art, an individual who had already actively sought contacts with the West in the 1960s, organized his first show of mail-art in 1975 at the Warsaw Gallery Studio, not in his own country. The exhibition, entitled *Art in Contact*, included contributions by approximately 50 artists. A similar show would take place three years later, in November 1978, in the East Berlin gallery Arkade.<sup>10</sup> Rehfeldt's contacts with Polish artists went back to the early 1970s,<sup>11</sup> but his selection of Poland was also determined by political considerations. According to Jürgen Weichardt, the author of a monograph on Rehfeldt, the artist wished to play the role of a mediator between the East and the West. He chose Poland because of the stagnation in the art scenes of the other Socialist countries. Czechoslovakia was in the midst of 'normalization'. In Hungary, the neo-avant-garde was just beginning to develop and overcome administrative impediments.<sup>12</sup>

Those East European exchanges and journeys had as their main goal, first, contact with Western culture, and second, to a lesser extent, development of knowledge about neighbouring countries. In general, there was little interest in East European art as such, and that which could be observed was limited to

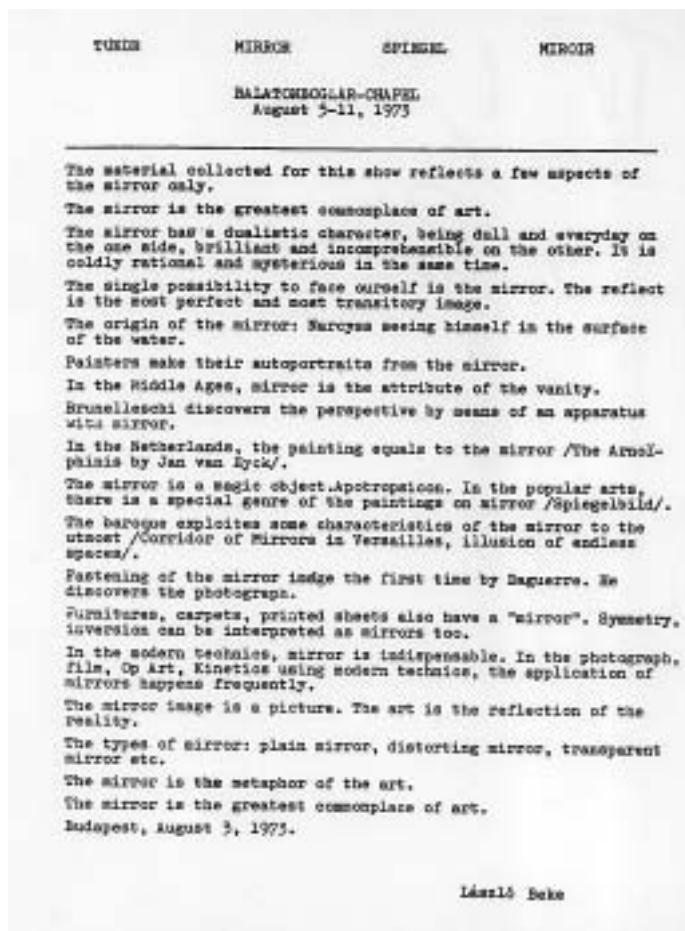
a very small, elite group. Each country in the region saw the West, not its neighbours, as the most desirable partner. The situation in Yugoslavia was even more unusual. Its art scene resembled that of a Western country more than a East European one. For that reason and because of Yugoslavia's independence from Big Brother, contacts with the country were viewed with particular suspicion by the regimes of the other East European states.

The difference in economic conditions between Yugoslavia and the other Eastern Bloc countries also made contacts between individuals difficult. As a semi-Western country, Yugoslavia was simply much more expensive as a destination than any other Eastern European country. At the same time it was a highly desirable one. During the 1970s, in addition to the traditional Yugoslav art centre of Zagreb, the art scene in Belgrade, especially around the Student Cultural Centre, affiliated with the Belgrade University (skc), acquired a much more dynamic character.<sup>13</sup> It attracted a significant number of Western artists and critics who made contacts here with Eastern European, in reality mainly Yugoslav, artists. For the latter, the Western European guests provided much more interesting opportunities for exchanges and contacts than their poorer and often rather isolated East European colleagues. Due to these political and economic circumstances, the problem of creating a world-class culture was rather easily solved in Yugoslavia.

The political, economic and administrative situations in the other countries of Eastern Europe were much more difficult. In Czechoslovakia the introduction of repressive measures after the suppression of the Prague Spring were creating a crisis within intellectual circles. Romania was facing a new wave of rigid cultural policies. Although certain changes were apparent in the GDR, the country was still perceived as a 'frontline' state and as such was subjected to more intense local and Soviet control, especially in the sphere of international contacts. Despite all these impediments, contacts among artists within Eastern Europe were certainly developing. Some artists were even able to mark their presence within the East German art scene thanks to the heroic efforts of unofficial, and in reality illegal and entirely or partly private, institutions. Among these, the Gallery EP, run by Jürgen Schweinebraden in his own Berlin apartment located at the Prenzlauer Berg, played a leading role.<sup>14</sup> Schweinebraden recalled that 'countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, [and] Hungary were interesting because the art tradition was not interrupted there to the extent it was in the GDR'.<sup>15</sup> As I mentioned earlier, of the three countries listed by Schweinebraden, Poland was initially the destination of choice for the GDR artists.

Although Hungarian artists faced a difficult situation in the early 1970s, by the end of the decade there was both a significant development of neo-avant-

garde art and an intensification of international contacts. László Beke, the Hungarian art critic who was perhaps the most knowledgeable about the region's art, played a critical role in that process. It was through him that the Polish creators of NET (Kostolowski and Kozłowski) made their initial contacts with the Hungarian artists.<sup>16</sup> He also organized the exhibition *Mirror* in 1973 at an alternative gallery space located in a chapel rented from the Catholic Church in Balatonboglár (illus. 125). After the exhibition the gallery was closed by the authorities. The idea for creating such an exhibition space came from György Galántai, a very active neo-avant-garde artist, organizer and collector of neo-avant-garde documents. Galántai and Julia Klaniczay would later found the Artpool Archive of neo-avant-garde art in Budapest.<sup>17</sup> The *Mirror* exhibition, organized against the background of a more difficult political situation than that in Poland or Yugoslavia, featured works by a significant number of not



125. László  
Beke, *Mirror*,  
1973.

only Hungarian artists but also foreign artists from both sides of the Iron Curtain, including Klaus Groh.<sup>18</sup>

Groh's book was an integral part of that environment. It recognized the fact that the East European neo-avant-garde experienced a significant development around the year 1970. This was a moment of simultaneous political and artistic realignments. The shifts in the art scene were largely analogous across the entire region. Everywhere there was a significant, and in some instances exponential, growth in the interest in neo-avant-garde art. In contrast, the political situation, which functioned as the context of those cultural processes, varied significantly across the region. This meant that while neo-avant-garde art could develop freely in some countries, and in some instances (Poland and Yugoslavia) even received official state support, in others it had to have a clandestine, almost underground, character. For instance, the dynamically developing Czechoslovak art of the 1960s fell victim to 'normalization'.<sup>19</sup>

The situation in Romania was much more complex. The 'thaw' inaugurated by Nicolae Ceaușescu ended here around 1970. In 1971 the regime introduced the so-called 'July Thesis', which announced a series of new, repressive cultural measures. With Ceaușescu's 'election' as the country's president in the mid-1970s all intellectual freedoms came to an end. From that moment on, each issue of the leading (and the only) Romanian art magazine *Arta* began with quotations from the dictator's statements about art and copious photographs documenting his speeches. Despite this political context, Romanian art continued to develop dynamically in the early 1970s. One could even say that it experienced a renaissance reminiscent of the art scene in Bucharest in the 1920s. New exhibition venues were created, exhibitions were organized and interesting artists appeared on the local art scene.

The political conditions also shifted in the GDR. Walter Ulbricht, the long-time leader of East Germany, the head of its Communist party and a typical hard-core Stalinist, left office in the early 1970s. His successor, Erich Honecker, presented himself as a moderate. The regime declared a greater willingness to consider the needs and ambitions of artists, though of course it did not keep its promises. Nevertheless, the process leading to a creation of 'an autonomous culture', a culture independent of the state and of its propaganda, was underway.<sup>20</sup> Yet in the GDR, as in Romania, once that process was started it could not be stopped. The mid-1970s did not resemble the mid-1950s, during which declarations of moderation of cultural policies were almost immediately followed by the 'Stalinist de-Stalinization'.<sup>21</sup> In the mid-1970s a similar manoeuvre failed and East German artists, especially younger ones, gradually succeeded in securing an ever expanding territory of autonomy for themselves.

During the same period, Yugoslavia, pursuing a policy of ‘openness’ and economic development, though not of political reforms, created an environment that fostered experimentation and development of the neo-avant-garde, or the phenomenon of ‘parallel culture’.<sup>22</sup> The situation in Poland, a country bordering Czechoslovakia, was closer to that in Yugoslavia. At the time when the Warsaw Pact troops (including Polish ones) were intervening in Czechoslovakia, the political future of the Polish Communist Party’s leader, Władysław Gomułka, was becoming uncertain. In 1968 Gomułka came under attack from Communist nationalists engaged in an anti-Semitic, anti-intelligentsia campaign. The rebellion of workers from the Baltic coast region that took place in 1970 was the final straw that led to his removal. The new leader of the Communist Party, Edward Gierek, implemented policies that resulted in much greater openness. As long as art did not violate the political principles of Communism and, in general, stayed away from politics, it was allowed to develop relatively freely. Moreover, it was supported by an improvement in the economic situation brought about by Western credit and manufacturing licences. Although this temporary prosperity was bought at a high cost (the Western loans were misappropriated and could not be paid back), until the mid-1970s no one in Poland seemed to be worried. Certainly, the artists participating in the neo-avant-garde ‘offensive’ did not voice any concern. In fact, a number of them treated the neo-avant-garde practice rather superficially, with an attitude that resembled the government’s approach to the issue of foreign debt.<sup>23</sup> However, within the festival-like atmosphere and ‘joyful art’ created by this new wave of ‘general mobilization’<sup>24</sup> one could also observe the development of interesting artistic forms and new values.

I will begin to sketch the map of East European neo-avant-garde of the 1970s with the special case of Czechoslovakia. One Czech artist, Hugo Demartini, joked that ‘it was a good thing that the Russians came. Otherwise we would have become art professors and official artists’.<sup>25</sup> He may have been right. Jiří Štelík, who wrote that under ‘normalization’ modern art took on a decidedly civic character, was also probably correct.<sup>26</sup> The Czech contemporary art movement developed along a parallel track to the official culture, which did not mean, however, that those two spheres of cultural practice did not interact. The Czechoslovak art scene was definitely divided into two adjacent zones: the sphere of official art with its official venues, artists, critics and dignitaries; and the sphere of unofficial art, which was semi-private and shown in studios or outdoors, in places that traditionally had little to do with art. This unofficial, parallel cultural sphere also had its own information distribution channels and its own hierarchies of value.<sup>27</sup> Because the ‘second circuit’ art was excluded

from the official venues, its shows and events could take place virtually anywhere. Several unofficial institutions played a particularly important role: the theatre in the Nerudovka district of Prague, the Institute of Molecular Chemistry of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague and Magdalena Jetelova's summer home in the town of Tichá Šárka, as well as various initiatives organized by Jiří Valoch in Brno (for instance at the local art venue Dóm umění, as well as many other less public places).<sup>28</sup> Those activities continued into the 1980s at such locations as the Railroad Cultural Centre in the Vinohrady district of Prague and the People's Centre in the Vysočany district.<sup>29</sup> In particular, one should also mention the Jazz Section, which published texts about neo-avant-garde art and monographs dedicated to Czech artists, which were edited in the mid-1970s by Karel Srp Jr.<sup>30</sup>

These were neither underground nor illegal initiatives; on the contrary, hence the resistance to describing the unofficial Czech art as an 'underground' phenomenon. But they did not take place within the context of professional art venues. Their ambivalent location has prompted the designation of 'grey zone' art.<sup>31</sup> Quite often artists simply took field-trips, during which they combined art experiments with conversation and other recreational activities, such as drinking beer. Sometimes the latter activity would be elevated to the rank of an art event, in particular by the group Křižovnická Škola (*Pivo v umění*, or *Bier in Art*).<sup>32</sup> Those types of outdoor events also took place in the city. The most famous of those was the 'Malostranské dvorky' initiative organized in the Prague Malá Strana district in April 1981.<sup>33</sup> The event quite literally annexed a large public space as an exhibition and performance site. It included a number of interesting works, including Magdalena Jetelova's very large wooden chair and Ivan Kafka's installation consisting of a large number of sticks inserted into the cracks between paving stones (illus. 126). Above all, 'Malostranské dvorky' demonstrated a strategy for breaking the isolation of unofficial art, for overcoming fear and for seeking a much wider audience than the private and elite spectators of the independent art scene.

However, before that could take place, neo-avant-garde art would be largely confined to the 'grey zone'. Unconventional locations encouraged unconventional actions.<sup>34</sup> One should note in this context performance art, which took over from the tradition of happenings developed during the previous decade by such artists as Eugen Brikcius and Milan Knižák.<sup>35</sup> There were significant differences between the happenings of the 1960s and the performance art of the 1970s. While happenings tended to be ironic, intellectual and socially provocative, the performances of the 1970s were much more expressive. They used the body, engendered emotional and psychological tensions and tested physical and psychological limits. In particular, one should

126. Ivan Kafka,  
*Placed  
Between*, 1981  
(part of  
*Malostranské  
dvorky*).



mention in this context works by Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch<sup>36</sup> and, somewhat later, Tomáš Ruller and Jiří Sozanský. Because I will discuss the works of the first three artists in much greater detail in the chapter on body art, I will focus here on the other two.

In the early 1970s Ruller began engaging in 'simple' performances, such as *The Road* (1974), which consisted of the artist moving a certain distance towards the light (exit) in an underground cave. The action alluded to Plato's allegory of a cave, which juxtaposed the world of matter (shadow) with the world of ideas (light). According to Ludvík Hlaváček, a shift in Ruller's work could be attributed to his meeting of a Polish artist, Zygmunt Piotrowski, and their collaboration on the project *Aufmerksamkeitsschule* (1983).<sup>37</sup> In later performances staged in Czechoslovakia and Poland Ruller subjects his body to different, sometimes very dramatic, investigations. For instance, the performance 8.8.1988 consisted of the artist setting himself on fire and jumping into water, then lying in mud, to test his endurance. Although this performance took place in the 1980s it referred back to the Prague Spring and the period of

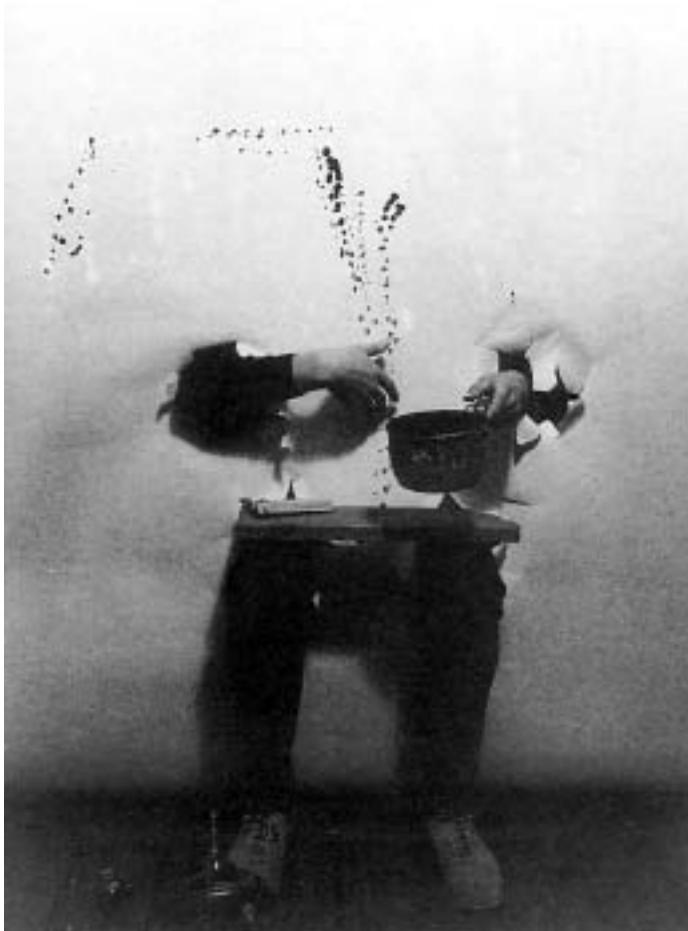
'normalization'. The work had a definite political significance, since it re-enacted Jan Palach's self-immolation on its twentieth anniversary.<sup>38</sup>

Sozanský's performances, especially those from the late 1970s and the early 1980s, were no less political.<sup>39</sup> In 1980 Sozanský and Zdeněk Beran organized a performance-installation at the former Terezín concentration camp, which evoked in a highly suggestive form (by appropriating former cells for an installation using figures and objects) the traumatic character of the site. Somewhat later, the artist staged a series of installations and performances in Most, a baroque city located in the north of the country. The town was slated for complete demolition to make room for a new factory and workers' housing. The motif running through the Most series was an escape from the ruined city destined for destruction (*Most*, 1981–2).

Other Czech artists, such as Dalibor Chartný, Milan Grygar and Jiří Kovanda, tended to continue the tradition of the 1960s. Grygar in particular persisted in creating works that recalled the art practice of the previous decade. This was particularly apparent in his installations that used wind-up birds that pecked white surfaces, leaving behind traces of paint (which their beaks were dipped in) or burns (when the artist attached burning matches to their beaks; *Life-Drawing with a Window/Živa kresba s ohněm*, 1970s). In other performances the artist, sitting behind a paper screen, with his arms and legs piercing its surface, dipped his fingers in paint and created accidental patterns on the surface of the paper with the movements of his hands (*Tactile Drawing*; illus. 127). Kovanda, on the other hand, made direct references to Knižák and his notion of 'current art' through simple actions performed in public spaces. For instance, he would stop passers-by or impede pedestrian traffic by extending his hands and blocking their passage (*Václavské námstí*, 1976). In general, as Jiří Valoch noted, the Czechoslovak art scene evinced a broad spectrum of performance art.<sup>40</sup>

Performance art was not the only component of the 'grey zone' of Czechoslovak culture. Other forms of neo-avant-garde practice, especially those that operated with unconventional means of expression and presentation like land art and conceptual art, were also present.<sup>41</sup> Many of those works took a hybrid form. For instance, some performances took place outdoors (Zorka Ságlová's, Karel Miler's, Jan Mlčoch's and Petr Štembera's), as did the famous field trips of the Křižovnická Škola led by Jan Steklík. Some conceptual projects also took place in the natural environment. For instance, in *Aesthetic Natural Reservation* (1971), J. H. Kocman attached signs to trees that stated that the object was 'reserved' for aesthetic contemplation (illus. 128). Jiří Valoch in *Stone* (1972) inscribed the word 'love' on rocks found in the countryside (illus. 129), and Karel Adamus photographed his own footsteps left on partly dried, muddy

surfaces during his walks. One should also mention in this context Ladislav Novák, who painted natural found objects such as rocks and stones with biomorphic patterns, transforming them into various mythical beasts. He also made bonfires. What is particularly worthy of attention with regards to Novák's works was their location. He lived and created his pieces in a provincial town, far from the main centres of art and culture. The people who lived in the area observed his works with a great deal of scepticism. They had a difficult time accepting them as artworks, since they understood art in very different terms. Moreover, this was the period of 'normalization', during which police tended to be more suspicious of anything strange. This was particularly true of provincial police, who could not characterize Novák's work according to any of the available stereotypes. Consequently, the artist's experiences were quite different from



127. Milan  
Grygar, *Tactile  
Drawing*, 1969.

that of his Prague colleagues, who were generally left alone. Nonetheless, quoting the French singer Edith Piaf, Novák observed: 'Non, je ne regrette rien'.<sup>42</sup>

Irrespective of how one were to draw the map of Czechoslovak art of the 1970s, the boundaries between official and unofficial art were well defined and neo-avant-garde tendencies were located almost always (if not exclusively) within the latter territory. Jindřich Chalupecký, a keen observer of the Czech art scene, compared the constraints put on Czech art to those imposed on Western art by the market: Western commercialization of art corresponded to Eastern (in this instance Czech) bureaucratization of art.<sup>43</sup> In either case art was subjected to manipulation. However, in addition to noting the negative con-



128. J. H.  
Kocman,  
*Aesthetic  
Natural  
Reservation,*  
1971.

129. Jiří Valoch,  
Stone, 1972.



sequences of such a state of affairs, Chalupecký pointed out its positive effects. Such clear division of the art scene meant that those artists who did not wish to abide by the official cultural procedures were essentially free of any external pressures. By letting go of the temptations inherent in any form of affiliation with the power structure, they could feel completely free to create without a need for compromise. The critic maintained that this was the source of the 'spiritual' character of Czech art. The artist created according to an inner impulse. Because his work was not shown by the official venues, he did not feel any need to restrain his imagination. This type of work was neither hermetic nor antisocial: it was created as a form of communication. It was also, wrote Chalupecký, 'political'. The term 'political' refers in this context to the Greek concept of *politikon* (that which pertains to *politeia* or society) and brings to mind a civic engagement rather than a directly political action.<sup>44</sup> This form of 'political' art was different from both the political art produced in the West and the political art demanded by the local bureaucrats.

Although Chalupecký's description reflected his idealism, which functions in this context as a remedy against the depression brought on by the process of 'normalization', it is also clear that underground or 'grey zone' art allowed Czechoslovak culture to survive the strategies of the bureaucrats and to defend aesthetic sensitivity and imagination not only against 'normalizing' forces, but also against the commercialism and conformism that so easily seduce the subjugated societies. Invoking Václav Havel, another insightful observer of Czechoslovak society, one could say that it was in the sphere of art that 'the power of the powerless' was most visible.<sup>45</sup> The artists, together with other cultural and underground political activists who in 1977 formed the independent coalition known as Charter '77, provided a clear demonstration of where and in what way the power of the police and the bureaucrats came to an end.

One of the key historic problems of Czechoslovak culture of the 1970s was its duality. The phenomenon of the 'parallelism' of official and unofficial culture was much less apparent in the other countries of the region and in some, for instance Poland, it was entirely absent. However, it could certainly be observed in East Germany and Romania. Each of those countries is a special case. At the end of the 1960s Romania underwent a period of political liberalization and, above all, experienced a cultural 'thaw'. By the early 1970s the Ceaușescu regime rescinded all previous concessions. In 1971 Ceaușescu published the July Theses, which set out the rules that were to govern the functioning of the 'socialist culture'. Several years later, in the mid-1970s, when Ceaușescu was 'elected' as the president of the country (until then he held only the post of the leader of the Communist Party), a period of bleak dictatorship commenced. It was marked on the one hand by the ruthless presence of the Romanian secret police, Securitate, and on the other by an aggressive cult of the leader that enshrined Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu ('Him' and 'Her') as the absolute rulers of the state. All of Romanian society experienced the devastating effects of this process. For instance, in Bucharest, Ceaușescu demolished parts of the old town to make room for the enormous People's Palace, planned as the seat of the government, to which led a monumental avenue in the style of Albert Speer.<sup>46</sup> This period would end in 1989 with the rather too quick execution of 'Him' and 'Her' by the tribunal of the Romanian revolution, which ended the rule of the Communist regime over the country.

However, the introduction of a brutal dictatorship after a few years of liberalization did not stop the development of modern art, including the development of the neo-avant-garde. The reports about the dictator's public appearances and quotes of his 'golden thoughts' that appeared in almost every issue of the only Romanian art journal, *Arta*, hid the lively pulse of the Romanian art beating under the surface of the official art scene.<sup>47</sup> Some

Romanian artists were even able to break onto the international art scene. One of the most spectacular examples of this was the exhibition of Romanian art organized in 1971 by Richard Demarco, a tireless enthusiast and promoter of Eastern Europe, in his Edinburgh gallery as part of the annual festival taking place in the city.<sup>48</sup> The exhibition included leading Romanian artists representing a diverse range of approaches, all related to the neo-avant-garde and united in their rejection of Socialist Realism.

Throughout the 1970s Romanian culture tended to operate through unofficial channels, even if (as in Czechoslovakia), it was never completely isolated from the ‘surface’ art scene. Clin Dan, a leading Romanian critic and artist, noted however that experimental art (a term widely used to characterize unofficial culture) could develop only to the extent allowed by the ‘non-experimental sector’. Above all, conservative society functioned as a frame of reference for both the ‘official’ and the ‘experimental’ cultures, determining the relatively conservative character of the latter. The amount of freedom available to artists on either side was defined not only by decrees issued by the party but also by the socially conservative character of Romanian society.<sup>49</sup>

Irrespective of the correctness of Dan’s observations regarding the general mechanisms that shaped the interdependence among the various sectors of Romanian culture, his remarks must be read through a very specific context. The critic observed them through a concrete case study of the development of media art. He noted its dependence on access to technology within Romanian society, the popularity of videos, illegal video-rental stores offering Western movies, the politics of the local television programming and so forth. In that context, both the official and the unofficial sectors shared the ‘aesthetics of poverty’. One can also observe in his remarks a certain desire to demythologize the independent culture that became apparent in all countries of the region after 1989 and functioned as a reaction to the increasingly combative attitudes of the participants of that culture as well as those who shunned it under the Communist regime.

However, when the most recent history of Romanian art is viewed from a more detached vantage point, it becomes clear that although both sectors ('experimental' and 'non-experimental') were connected through a socio-political frame, they occupied separate spheres embracing different art values and operating within distinct social networks. This division encouraged extra-institutional forms of artistic communication, such as mail-art, actively practised by artists such as Constantin Flondor.<sup>50</sup> However, it should be noted that the first exhibition exploring the dynamics of Romania's mail-art took place in 1985 in Bucharest. Until then, Romanian mail-art was a ‘private’ movement and as such entirely consistent with its founding principles.

There was one exception to the binary division of the Romanian art scene, namely Ion Bitzan, an artist who became one of the most frequently ‘exported’ Romanian artists of the Ceaușescu era. His international career began in 1964 when he was awarded a fellowship in Italy. Within two years, he had two shows in Poland (in Poznań in 1966 and in Sopot in 1967), exhibitions in The Hague and Amsterdam, a fellowship from the Stedelijk Museum and shows in New York, Paris and Northern Ireland, as well as visiting lectureships in the United States (New York, Washington DC, San Francisco and Philadelphia).<sup>51</sup>

Bitzan’s work during the 1960s and ’70s was seemingly in a state of suspended animation. In the 1950s the artist, who scrupulously avoided Socialist Realist formulas (he began showing in 1953), produced more or less conventional still lifes and landscapes that incorporated elements of abstraction.<sup>52</sup> In 1964 he had an opportunity to visit the Venice Biennale and to see Robert Rauschenberg’s work (Rauschenberg won the *Grand Prix* that year). Kristine Stiles writes that Rauschenberg’s exhibition made a lasting impression on the Romanian artist, prompting him to investigate object art, collage, assemblage and other neo-avant-garde modes of production over the course of the 1960s.<sup>53</sup> These experiments produced such works as *Small Sacks* (1969), *Generator of Images* (1976) and *Towers* (1977–8). Those were not radical statements exploring the identity of an artwork as an object, a subject discussed by Arthur Danto in relation to Pop art, in particular Andy Warhol.<sup>54</sup> Bitzan’s works (and the majority of similar East European neo-avant-garde experiments) were implicated in poetics that underscored the importance of the creative function understood within traditional aesthetic categories. In general, they did not produce a critique of Modernist painting, so pervasive in the Western neo-avant-garde. Bitzan wrote that he wanted to see in his ‘poetic objects’ that which was invisible.<sup>55</sup> Those were entirely different motivations from those inspiring Western artists associated with Anglo-American neo-Dada and Pop art, or French new realism. Bitzan’s attitude was to a large extent shaped by the absence of such a ‘negative’ tradition within the East European neo-avant-garde, as well as a certain hesitation in formulating a critique of painting in a situation where the value of art and the status of autonomous artworks were threatened by the cultural policies of the Communist regime. The regime’s preference for far-reaching instrumentalization of art posed a challenge to the ideal of art’s autonomy and the artist’s right to subjective production of works.

In Bitzan’s case there were also political reasons why the artist avoided taking more radical steps and tended to practice a form of parallelism in his representational and object-based works. Radicalism could have resulted in the

loss of the privileges, such as freedom to travel and to exhibit, that Bitzan enjoyed during the Ceaușescu reign. After the dictator was executed in 1989 and his regime had failed, Bitzan began to work much more freely. Until his death in 1997, he worked on a series that used books to construct various *Libraries*, some of which had a directly political character, such as the work from 1990 that used portraits of Lenin and Stalin.

Bitzan was an exception among the Romanian artists of the 1970s (and not only then). However, one should not assume that his career functioned as the only point of contact between the 'experimental' and the 'non-experimental' sectors. Such contacts also occurred within the institutional sphere. There were certainly official venues where artists of the 'experimental' sector could show their works. In particular, one should mention here the gallery Apollo, which actively exhibited neo-avant-garde works during the 1970s, and, above all, Studio 35, created in 1972 on the initiative of younger artists, among them Ana Lupaș, as a 'branch' of the official artists' union.<sup>56</sup> Dedicated to showing works by artists under 35 years of age, Studio 35 aimed to support and showcase experimental art in a national arena. Moreover, the geography of Romania, the number of art centres and a certain decentralization of the neo-avant-garde art scene allowed a freedom that was greater than one might have expected. While the capital of Bucharest was home to such leading figures of the Romanian neo-avant-garde as Geta Brtescu and Ion Grigerescu, Group 111 and Sigma were active in Timișoara, a city with a strong tradition of neo-Constructivism. Mihai Olos created some of the first Romanian happenings in the mining and agricultural region of Baia Mare (25, Baia Mare, 1969; *Gold and Wheat*, Herja Mine, 1972). And finally, Ana Lupaș worked at an art school (a thoroughly 'official' institution) located in the town of Cluj.<sup>57</sup>

However, this mixing and interaction between the different spheres did not mean that the very real differences between official and unofficial art disappeared in Romania in the 1970s, as they did in Poland. That tension persisted within the Romanian art scene, especially since Ceaușescu's cultural policies did not favour neo-avant-garde attitudes. If these were tolerated, sometimes even within official art institutions, this was done with the conviction that such experiments would only have a limited impact and could not influence public opinion. In reality, well-educated Romanian intellectuals were isolated as an elite within the poorly educated Romanian society and as such had no way to have a broader social impact. The situation was very different in Poland, a fact that was not lost on the Polish regime, which was aware of the fact that a writer could have potentially a much greater impact on social attitudes than the entire, very expensive, apparatus of the Communist propaganda. Paradoxically, then, it was the marginal character of the Romanian

avant-garde, its elitism and its relatively small size that allowed the artists to function within this uncompromising police state.

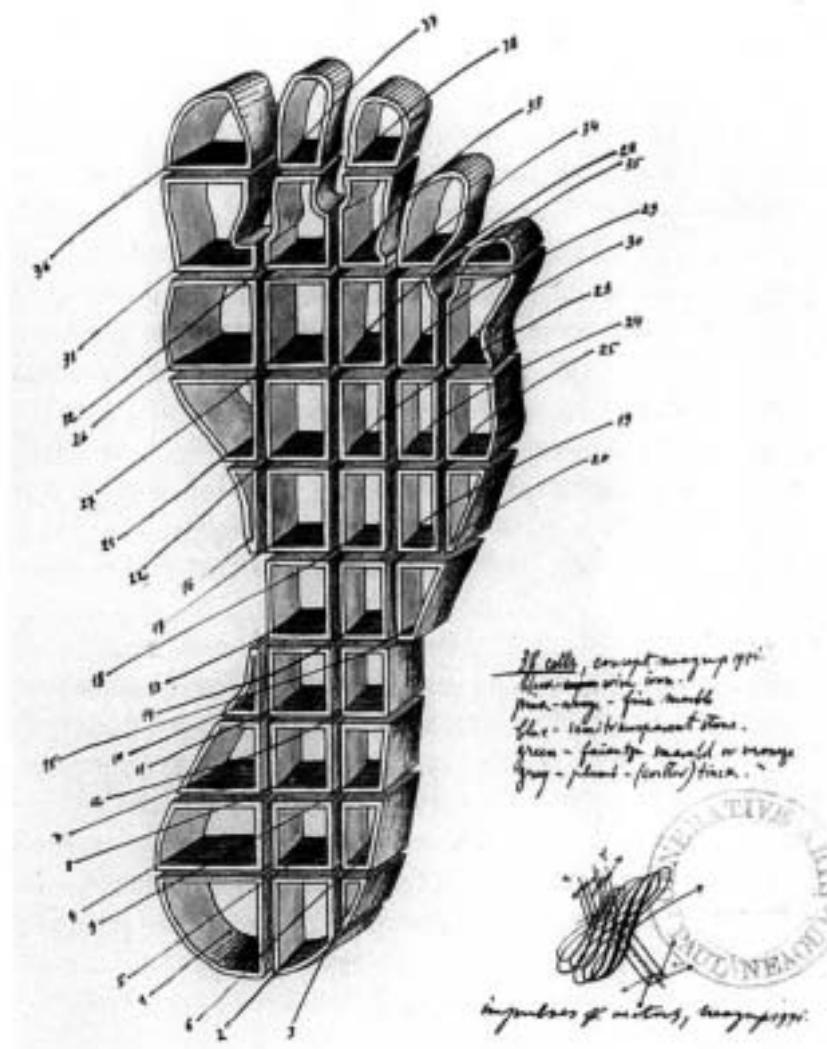
The popularity of installation art, happening and performance appears significant in this context.<sup>58</sup> On the one hand, this was clearly ‘unofficial’ art: it developed according its own rhythm, uncontrolled by the authorities, it was ephemeral, it gave its practitioners an opportunity for complete freedom of expression and control over their work that allowed them to avoid the issue of the object altogether. On the other, those forms of art practice required an immediate contact with the viewer: they aimed at engaging the public on a ‘social’ level. As a result, the Romanian performance artists remained largely unknown to the general Romanian public as well as the international one. However, because they were hidden from sight they could breach taboo social, gender and political issues and, to a greater or lesser extent, express their artistic individuality through immediate confrontation with the viewer.

I will discuss the work of Ion Grigorescu in the chapter on body art, but I would like to examine here the art of Paul Neagu, an artist who remained in Romania for a relatively short period of time. Neagu was able to travel abroad from the late 1960s, thanks to invitations received from such individuals as Richard Demarco (his invitation would prove particularly fruitful in the long term) and due to the favourable climate of the short-lived political ‘thaw’. However, by the end of the decade he was beginning to encounter resistance. After the authorities rescinded his 1969 award for ‘artistic investigations’, he made the decision to remain in the West and a year later moved to London.<sup>59</sup> He quickly settled in and situated himself within the British and European art scene, partly by making a strategic decision to found the Generative Art Group.<sup>60</sup> The crowning point of this difficult, initial period of emigration was his first Western individual show, which took place in the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford in 1975.

The authors who have written about Neagu agree that despite physical distance the work produced by the artist during this period was still rooted in the formative period which the artist spent in Romania.<sup>61</sup> This fact becomes particularly significant in view of the fact that Neagu’s decision to pursue a career as an artist was to a certain extent accidental. He drifted in the direction of art because he was prevented from studying philosophy. His social background (his father was a cobbler and a Baptist) did not fit the regime’s ideal of a desirable philosophy student.<sup>62</sup>

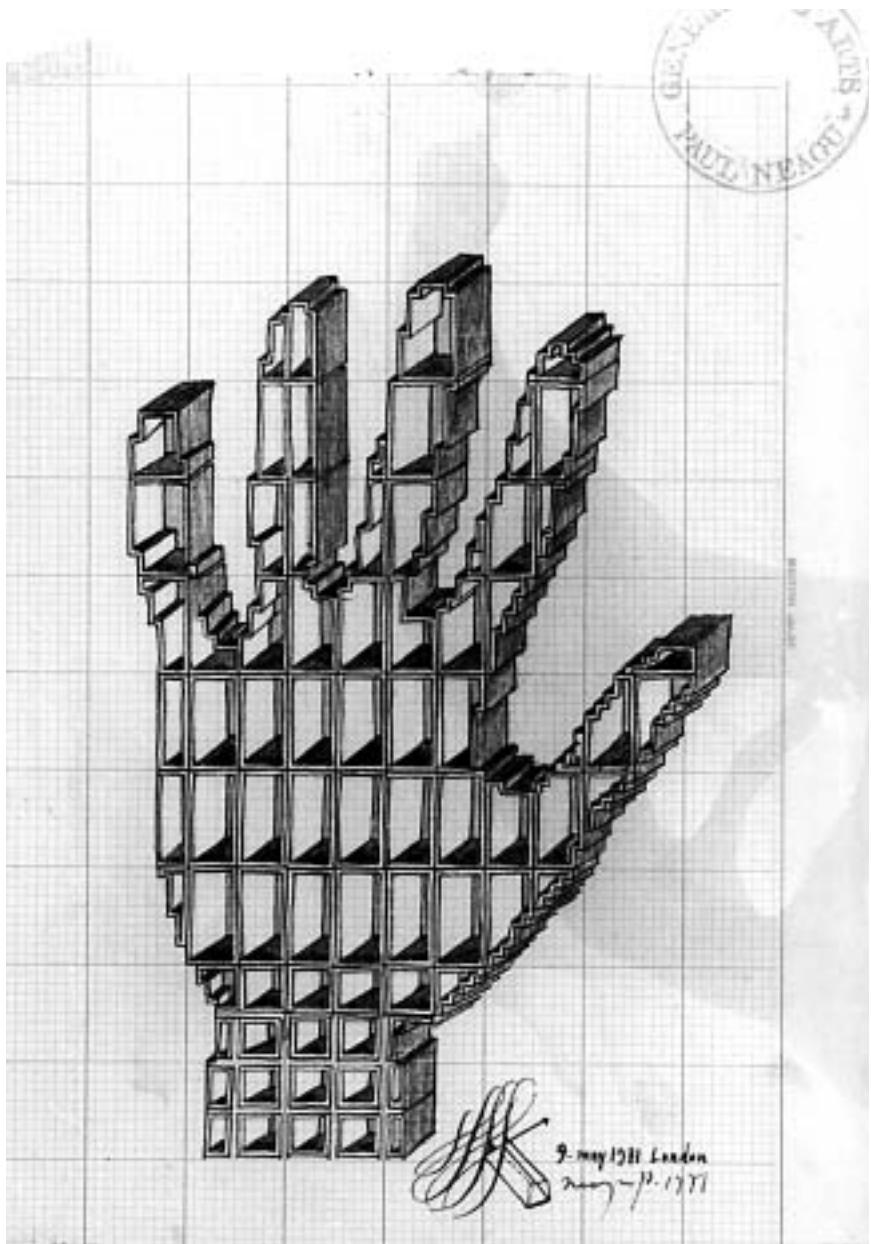
At the heart of Neagu’s rich and intriguing body of works are two elements. On the one hand, there is thinking in terms of a structure defined as a whole composed of constituent elements or spatial cells, a whole defining a totality, a cosmos considered on many levels from a micro- to a macro-

organism. Man functions as the axis orienting this cosmological-conceptual thinking, a fact acknowledged by Paul Overy, who described Neagu's art as 'anthropocosmic'.<sup>63</sup> This is the context for a series of Neagu's drawings of figures and body parts, as well as his construction and exhibition of objects composed of small cells recalling the structure of a honeycomb (illus. 130, 131). This interpretation is also the basis of the British author's social analysis of Neagu's methods. Overy sees the honeycomb structure used by the Romanian artist as a form of social organization such as the one created by the bees. Read against this background, the work raises the question of the role of an



130. Paul Neagu,  
*Human Foot,*  
35 Cells, 1971.  
Paul Neagu  
estate, London.

individual in such a 'perfectly' functioning society. Overy suggests that while in each society there exists a tension between the individual and the social whole, in the societies of Western Europe this tension is particularly acute and conflict generating. The spatial honeycomb cells in Neagu's constructions



131. Paul Neagu,  
*Human Hand,*  
*XX-Century*  
*Cells*, 1971.  
Paul Neagu  
estate, London.

allude, therefore, to individuals situated within larger and more complex structures.<sup>64</sup> This attempt to historicize the artist's work, formulated on the margins of the author's main argument, does not appear very convincing. This is especially true when one considers that Communist societies functioned with a much greater degree of conflict and confrontation among the individual and the social whole than the Western ones. Moreover, it is highly problematic comparing such tension with the social life of bees.

The 'anthropocosmic' interpretation of Neagu's unusual constructions appears much more appropriate. The artist's work also involves an engagement with the material (often consumable) from which he created his small objects and the manner of their perception. Neagu maintained that vision is not only insufficient as an instrument of perception, but that it interferes with the full experience of objects. It should, therefore, lose its privileged status in favour of other senses: touch, taste, smell and so on. As a consequence, the perception or experience of small objects or larger constructions composed of small elements should engage all the senses. One should touch, smell or even consume them. Neagu developed those views in 1969 and published them in 1970 as his *Palpable Art Manifesto*.<sup>65</sup>

While in England, Neagu created performances, such as the one organized in conjunction with the exhibition *The Great Tactile Table* held at the Sigi Krauss Gallery in London in May 1971, during which members of the audience were encouraged to consume an 'anthropocosmic' figure created from waffles. Similarly, during the *Blind Bite* event, which took place at the London Highbury Studio in 1975, blindfolded members of the audience consumed various prepared dishes.<sup>66</sup> Such a concept of art (replacement of sight by touch) reinforced the 'anthropocosmic' character of Neagu's works. By activating greater number of senses, the artist allowed the viewer to experience the cosmos more fully. He was invited by the artist to touch the work of art and to explore its various components. By familiarizing himself with constituent elements (the micro-structure), he was able to know the whole (the macro-structure). He proceeded in his exploration from a spatial cell or a body fragment to the entire body and the space which that body occupied: a bed, a coffin, a house, or larger structures, a city, a country.<sup>67</sup> An individual element of the structure, such as a single cell, became, in this context, an intimation of the entire universe.

The changes that took place in the Communist leadership of the GDR in 1971, in particular the stepping down of the hardliner Walter Ulbricht and the ascent to power of the 'moderate' Erich Honecker, led to the introduction of somewhat more permissive cultural policies heralded by the slogan 'Weite und Vielfalt'

(broad and diverse) support for culture. Of course, those were tactical manoeuvres of the new regime rather than indications of an actual revolution in the GDR culture. The values of ‘Socialist culture’ continued to function as the anchor of the East German cultural policies.<sup>68</sup> But those changes did overlap with significant generational shifts. Rüdiger Thomas notes that after the first two post-war generations of the German intellectuals, ‘the generation of the founders of the GDR’ and that ‘of the lost hopes’, there appeared a new generation engaged in production of the so-called autonomous culture, more or less independent of the state’s cultural policies, more or less unofficial and alternative.<sup>69</sup>

The Biermann case played a significant role in defining this generation. In 1977 the GDR authorities deprived Wolf Biermann, a politically inconvenient but popular singer-songwriter, of his East German citizenship when he was visiting West Germany. It appeared that the regime was unprepared for the wave of protests among the intellectuals who came to the singer’s defence. Some of the individuals who defended Biermann were not at all interested in criticizing the East German political system. In fact, GDR oppositional circles endorsed many of the same principles advocated by the regime: Marxism, anti-fascism, ant-imperialism and a negative attitude toward Western culture. They objected, however, to the state’s decision to strip the singer of his citizenship against his will.<sup>70</sup>

However, despite such tensions, the division of culture into the official and the unofficial was not always clear-cut in the GDR. In this respect, the situation there resembled that in Czechoslovakia and Romania. The Western critics who wrote about East German art often contributed to the confusion. Karin Thomas notes, for instance, that when the leading official GDR artists, Werner Tübke, Bernhard Heisig, Wolfgang Mattheuer and Willi Sitte, appeared in the 1977 *Documenta 7*, Eduard Beaucamp, the art critic for the prestigious *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, described their work as ‘revolutionary’.<sup>71</sup> It would be truly difficult to come up with a more absurd assessment, especially since there actually were a number of truly radical and oppositional artists active at the time in East Germany, for instance A. R. Penck (Ralf Winkler). In general, if one could make an observation about texts published in the West about the official East European culture, in this case the GDR, it is that they reveal a remarkable respect for and a genuine lack of critical distance from the official cultural discourse and its phraseology.<sup>72</sup> Their authors did not seem to understand that, at least during the post-Stalinist period, the rhetoric of Socialism was used almost exclusively to conceal the will to power, rather than to actually promote certain ideological values. In other words, the ideology was used to secure and maximize particular interests and to obscure the ‘ordinary’

desire to rule. Beaucamp's naïveté must be seen within the context of this Western failure to challenge the projected official image of East Europe. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to characterize the tension between the official and the unofficial culture in terms of clear opposition, especially since some instructions associated with the alternative or 'autonomous' culture functioned within the sphere of permissions, concessions and other forms of tactical accommodation made by the authorities, more or less forced to do so by the circumstances or by the reality of tolerated cultural expressions that were escaping official control.

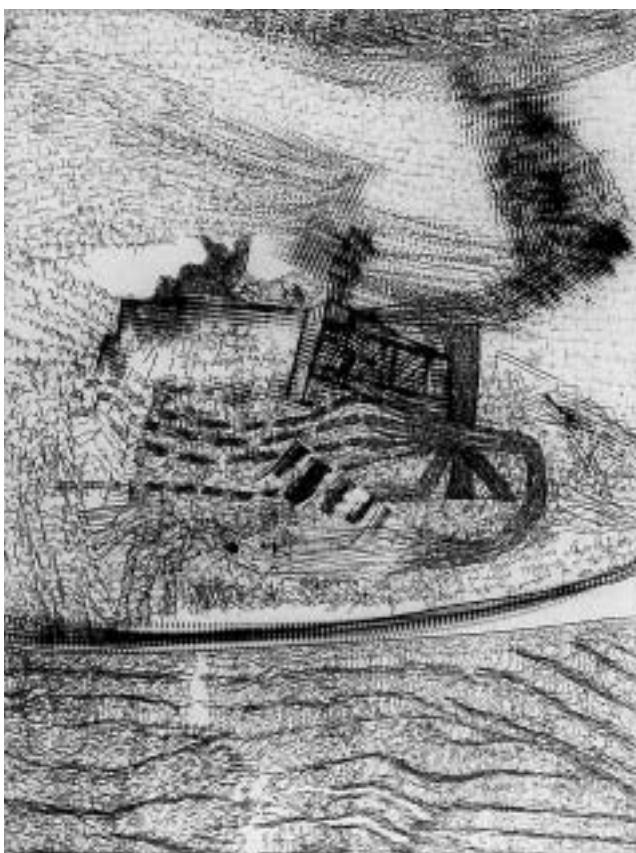
One of the best examples of this tension is the phenomenon of private art galleries. Paul Kaiser and Claudia Petzold wrote that during the period from the 1970s to the end of the GDR there were approximately forty 'unofficial and private galleries' active in East Germany.<sup>73</sup> Naturally, those galleries represented different relationships to the system of power. Among them there were such 'institutions' as Jürgen Schweinebraden's EP Galerie, a completely private initiative functioning in the 'director's' apartment from 1974 to 1980, the year when he left East Germany. The gallery's name announced its status: EP stood for *Einzig Private*, the only private gallery.<sup>74</sup> On the other extreme, there was an 'official' gallery, Arkade, which functioned from 1974 to 1981 within the sphere of the state-managed art market. The decision of the gallery's director, Klaus Werner, to support and exhibit artists who functioned outside official cultural institutions earned Arkade the reputation of being a serious and progressive venue. Günther Huniat's outdoor gallery-atelier played an important role in the lively art scene of Leipzig. It was formally opened in 1980, but was closely related to the artist's and his friends' efforts from the 1970s, such as their large group project *Tangiente*, which consisted of a multimedia show.<sup>75</sup> The Clara Mosch gallery in Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz), founded in 1977, also deserves special mention. It functioned in part as a private initiative of a group of artists and in part as a semi-official venue falling under the jurisdiction of the local cultural bureaucracy, which would eventually close it down in 1982. Clara Mosch continued the work of the earlier Galerie Oben.<sup>76</sup> The gallery's mysterious name came from a combination of the first syllables of the founders' last names, 'Cla' from Carlfriedrich Claus, 'ra' from the married couple, Thomas Ranft and Dagmer Ranft-Schinke, 'Mo' from Michael Morgner, and 'sch' from Gregor-Torsten Schade, later known as Kozik.<sup>77</sup>

Eugen Blume, the author of a study on GDR art seen through the lens of Clara Mosch, draws attention to the derivative character of the art produced within its sphere, the hackneyed nature of its *plein-air* activities, productions that created an illusion of freedom and simply copied Western models.<sup>78</sup> Though this may be true to a certain extent, one has to keep in mind that

those East German initiatives took place within completely different circumstances from similar earlier Western ones. They were not forbidden in the West; the art scene was not full of STASI agents, or at least was not as fully penetrated as in the East. The so-called ‘universal criteria’ of artistic values are, in fact, Western criteria. When used to evaluate Eastern European experiences, in particular from the historic perspective, they obscure the meaning and significance of the works and processes that were created and took place in this part of the continent.

Even if one were to accept as valid Blume’s critical perspective, it would be impossible to ignore the significance of one of the artists associated with the Clara Mosch gallery. I am referring to Carlfriedrich Claus, one of the most fascinating figures of post-war East German art. Claus’s art and life were both highly unusual. The artist functioned on the margins of the art scene, creating his work with great dedication and perseverance. He lived his entire life in a small town named Annaberg near Karl-Marx-Stadt (Chemnitz) and was, for all practical purposes, invisible to the cultural bureaucracy of the GDR. However, it would be difficult to use models available from the history of culture, of a self-isolated thinker or a hermit, to describe his lone art practice, far removed as it was from all art centres (including those in the GDR).<sup>79</sup> Claus was, after all, interested in social and political analysis, but one approached from a broad perspective, rather than a narrowly pragmatic one. He reached for widely varied sources: Eastern philosophical tradition, Kabbalah, Taoism, alchemy, different fields within biological sciences and the occult, as well as Marxism and the theory of Communism. He also used many different forms of language, some rather hermetic, such as Hebrew, in his works inspired by Jewish mythology, religion and thought. Moreover, his isolation and removal from current events did not lead to introversion. When asked by Henry Schumann: ‘You must have been subjected to different pressures due to the lack of understanding of your art and research; did this long-term isolation give rise to an auto-reflexive dialogue, and internal dialogue?’, Claus responded: ‘I lived in isolation, but I was connected to social events. This was a very important factor, I could even say, decisive one. I was not in a dialogue with myself, but with social, political, and natural processes; this was not an internal journey, not introversion’. When asked: ‘How would you describe your worldview?’, the artist answered: ‘I am a Communist’.<sup>80</sup> This response was without doubt a symptom of a very serious conviction. On the one hand, it represented a rather typical attitude among those associated with the independent intellectual circles of the GDR, on the other it was highly untypical, since it was motivated exclusively by philosophical considerations supported by far-ranging studies, rather than pragmatic, strategic or superficially mythological ones.

Although Claus's art functioned on the margins of the GDR art scene, it was not entirely unknown. There were small exhibitions of his work in East Germany: in 1975 at the Berlin gallery Arkade and in 1980 in the Dresden Kupferstich-Kabinett, directed by Werner Schmidt, an institution that played a key role in supporting the independent art of the GDR. His work was also included in a 1979 group show held at the Clara Mosch gallery. There were a few others. At the same time, Claus had no desire to leave the country, despite the fact that his difficult works were attracting considerable attention abroad. After the fall of the GDR his art quickly came to public attention. Although there were numerous exhibitions and monographs, it is not at all certain that his work is better understood today.<sup>81</sup> One could even say that his growing popularity and participation in many, often large-scale, exhibitions has interfered with the proper reception of his highly hermetic, complex and difficult art. Perhaps it is impossible to read (literally) his works during a large exhibition attended by crowds of viewers, since such reading requires intense focus, concentration and a great deal of time.



132. Carl-Friedrich Claus,  
*Frage nach Naturbeziehung, die nicht mehr auf Ausbeutung, Macht, Zähmung basiert, sondern auf Solidarität auch mit der Natur, 1976/1977.*

Naturally, Claus made various types of works during his long career, which began in the 1950s. Some could be described as visual and some as 'audio' poems, since the artist used visual as well as acoustic means of expression. However, he most frequently used transparent sheets, which he inscribed with notations on both sides. He referred to the resulting works as *Sprachblätter*. Claus's *Sprachblätter* are complex statements that have to be read while being viewed and viewed while being read. Because they are double-sided, when one reads the thesis located one side, one can see, though cannot yet read, its antithesis located on the obverse. When the sheet is turned over, the order is reversed. The entire work – its two sides – appears after a while as a synthesis.<sup>82</sup> It is only when one has read and seen the text written by the artist in small script (sometimes Claus used his left hand even though he was right-handed), text that arranges itself and develops according to the narrative into visual forms, that one is able to grasp the sense of the work. All formal characteristics of the work are intertwined. The text turns into an image and



133. Carl-Friedrich Claus,  
*Imaginieren im Kindsein: Aurora darin*,  
1976.

vice versa. The image becomes the text because of what it ‘represents’. However, those are not the immediate associations one finds in concrete or visual poetry; on the contrary, the perception of the whole requires careful reading and viewing. That is why, paradoxically, at the moment when Claus’s art has become more popular and therefore more available, it has remained inaccessible to a wider audience. As a result the artist remains a marginal figure, though it may be that such a situation is in fact necessary for him to produce his work (illus. 132, 133).

While the system of East German exhibition venues had to make different types of concessions and was, to a large extent, dependent on the GDR authorities, as the histories of the Arkade and Clara Mosch galleries plainly demonstrate, the correspondence-based art networks formed an entirely unencumbered system within which neo-avant-garde culture could function freely. This external factor was the main reason for the tremendous popularity and dynamic development of mail-art in the GDR.<sup>83</sup> It is not an accident that after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Berlin was the site of the first, and so far the only, large-scale, systematically comparative exhibition of East European mail-art.<sup>84</sup> In general, mail-art was very popular in Eastern Europe because the art scene was to a greater or lesser extent under the control of the region’s authorities. In contrast, mail-art gave everyone an illusion that art practice could be safeguarded from external political and police controls. Mail-art allowed for a possibility of free expression unencumbered by juries, financial subsidies, political and social censorship. The motto of mail-art was: ‘No fee! No jury! No return!’ It gave the impression of a full democracy and free contact with the world irrespective of the actual geographic location of those engaged in the exchange. It also created contacts with the West, the absence of which was keenly felt by East European artists.

The idea of mail-art was not invented in Eastern Europe. It was inaugurated by Ray Johnson in the early 1960s as the New York Correspondence School and popularized by the artists associated with Fluxus. In 1971 there was a separate exhibition of mail-art during the Paris Biennale, which led to Jean-Marc Poinsot’s book, *Mail-Art: Communication à distance*.<sup>85</sup> However, in Eastern Europe mail-art appears to have been much more popular than in the West because the region largely lacked other means of free communication. Exchange through mail seemed most effective. Of course, the police surveyed correspondence, but it was much more difficult to control all correspondence than it was to control all exhibitions. Moreover, participation in an international mail exchange gave the East European artists the illusion that they were participating in the international art movement at a relatively low cost. One must take those economic factors under consideration when dealing with East European mail art.

Everyone who participated in mail-art knew that the correspondence was under surveillance. Jarosław Kozłowski, one of the artists associated with NET, generally considered to be the first mail-art initiative in this part of Europe, recalled the frequent attempts by the Polish secret police to infiltrate the network. If one takes into consideration the fact that Poland was a relatively free country within the Eastern Bloc, one can imagine the extent of surveillance over correspondence, especially foreign correspondence, in the other socialist countries. According to Géza Perneczky, the Hungarian artist Endre Tót, who claimed to have been the first practitioner of mail-art in Eastern Europe,<sup>86</sup> travelled to neighbouring Yugoslavia in order to send out his mail-art correspondence from Belgrade, thereby confusing the Hungarian police.<sup>87</sup> Steffen Giersch, one of the East German members of the mail-art movement, who worked as a trucker, would send his correspondence from different locations as he travelled through the country.<sup>88</sup>

The awareness that the police was intercepting and reading letters and postcards, and copying, archiving and using them for further infiltration, sometimes caused self-censorship.<sup>89</sup> But such surveillance must also have caused downright comical situations. Eugen Blume observed that the East German STASI studied communiqués sent out by Robert Rehfeldt, with great scrupulousness and seriousness. Rehfeldt, playing with those hidden readers, would write on his stamped cards: 'do not think about me', 'I thought about something that you completely did not think about when I was thinking about it', 'I am sending you an idea – please keep thinking'.<sup>90</sup> Despite such surveillance, but because of the awareness of the surveillance and of the consequences that simply could not be imagined by the inhabitants of the 'free' world, Eastern European mail-art initiatives often involved very widespread and broadly conceived projects, such as *Visuelle Erotik*, organized in 1982 by the Dresden-based artist Jürgen Gottschalk, which consisted of sending humorous erotic postcards by mail.<sup>91</sup> Such works were rarely shown in the GDR as part of formal exhibitions. One of the few occasions when mail-art was featured was the exhibition *Postkarten und Kunstlerkarten* organized by Klaus Werner, which took place in October 1978 in the Arkade gallery. Later, some of the main venues for mail-art were churches, which functioned as active centres of alternative GDR culture.

One of the leading figures of the East European mail-art movement was the East German artist Robert Rehfeldt.<sup>92</sup> Rehfeldt, who initially worked as a painter, gave up painting after the authorities closed his exhibition in 1966. Eugen Blume noted that this was a turning point in the development of East German mail-art.<sup>93</sup> The artist began sending out 'golden thoughts' stamped on cards: *Kunst heute ist die Geschichte von morgen* (today's art is tomorrow's

134. Robert  
Rehfeldt,  
*Kunst ist wenn*  
*Sie trotzdem*  
*entsteht,*  
undated.  
Private  
collection.



history), *Ich sende Ihnen einen Gedanken zu bitte danken Sie Ihn weiter* (I send you some thoughts, please consider them further), *Kunst heute ist grenzenlos* (today art has no borders), and so forth (illus. 134). Occasionally the artist mailed larger word-collages or produced humorous staged photographic self-portraits or visual montages with political undertones, such as *Où est le diable* (illus. 135), which showed the leaders of the socialist countries signing an agreement, or *La Place Rouge* (illus. 136), which demonstrated a method for inserting a figure of Stalin into photographs showing Lenin walking, thereby unmasking a common propaganda practice of producing evidence of Stalin's close relationship with the leader of the proletarian revolution. Rehfeldt also

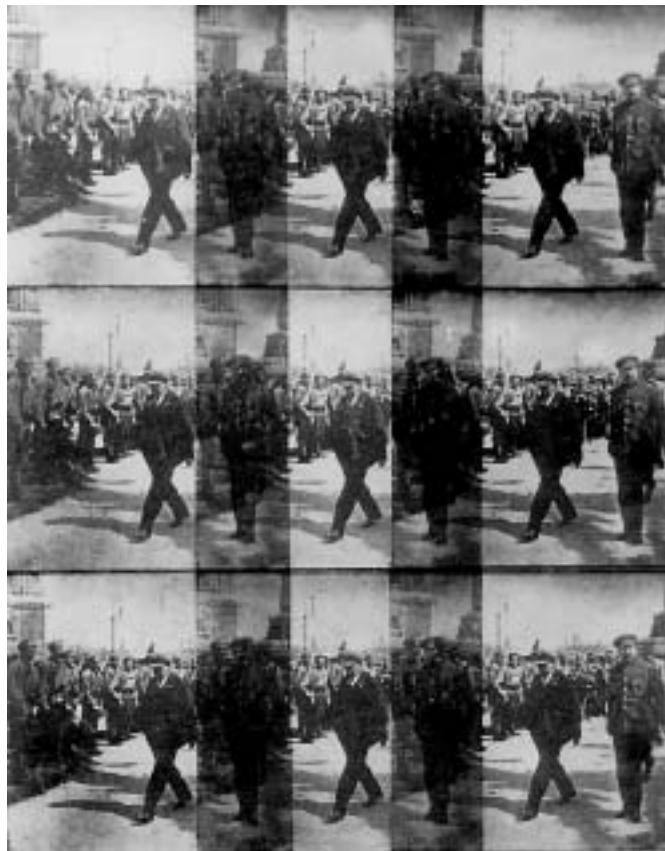
played a significant role in inspiring other East German artists and contributing to a dynamic development of the local art scene. Together with his wife, Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, he maintained a far-ranging collection of documentation on contemporary art in the GDR as well as beyond the county's borders.

Mail-art also developed in other Eastern European countries. In Hungary, Endre Tót was one of its most active practitioners. His project *Zero Post*, one of his best-known works, aimed to eliminate the contents and all external elements from postal communication (illus. 137). The project took different forms: a sheet of postage stamps, stamps, and other efforts to neutralize ('nullify') the contents of the correspondence.<sup>94</sup> One should also mention the Artpool archive, created by György Galántai and Julia Klaniczay at the end of the 1970s. The archive assembled an enormous collection related to the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, including Galántai's own art and his 'postal' projects, such as his *SelfPost* stamps (illus. 138), which were much more



135. Robert Rehfeldt, *Où est le diable*, 1969.

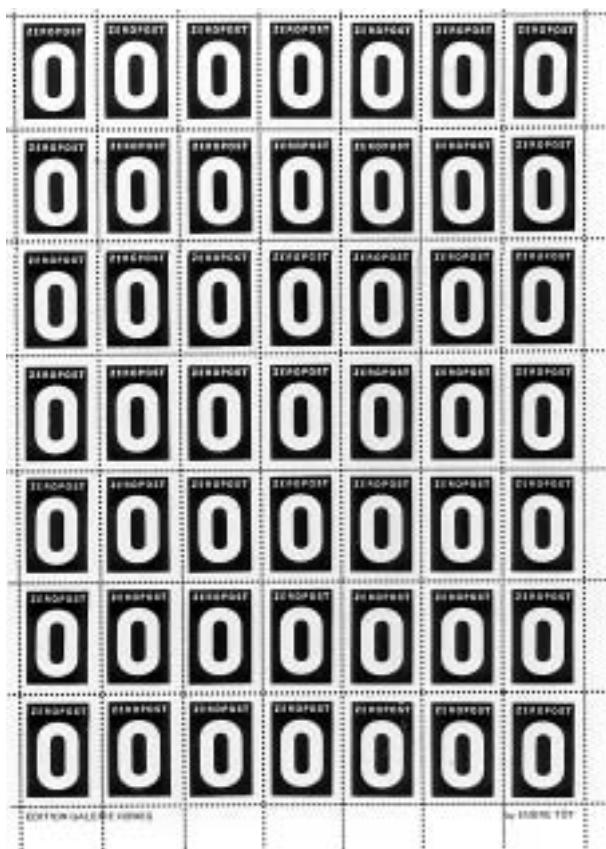
136. Robert  
Rehfeldt,  
*La Place Rouge*,  
1976.



narrative and graphically complex than those produced by Tót.<sup>95</sup> Those types of projects were certainly a symptom of the desire for much greater freedom among East European artists and intellectuals, and as such were an attempt to bypass the restrictions imposed on the art scene by the Communist authorities.

Géza Perenczky, one of the most active Hungarian art critics of the period, has described this type of work (using the example of Galántai's projects) as 'Eastern Modernism', a term that functions as a synonym of post-modernism.<sup>96</sup> This terminological shift conveys in an elegant manner the basic differences in the strategies of the Eastern and Western neo-avant-gardes, their inspirations and their contexts. When considered in purely 'stylistic' or 'formal' terms, one could see East European neo-avant-garde practices as being, to a certain extent, derivative. However, because they appeared in a different historic frame, activities that were quite straightforward and mundane in the West acquired in an East European context a very different significance. Their performance often involved deeply held existential and political convictions.

137. Endre Tót,  
*Zero Post*, 1974.



Sending out a stamp, a letter or a card, something that in the West carried no risk and involved no emotional investment, was connected in the East with a defence of the basic human right to free expression and was often understood as a form of public service or protest.

In Hungary, a country that in the 1970s was still slowly emerging from the post-1956 trauma, neo-avant-garde art certainly carried such associations. Its projects tended to require public reception and public performance. The neo-avant-garde scene experienced a period of dynamic development in the early 1970s.<sup>97</sup> Of course, the history of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde began much earlier, in the second half of the 1960s, when the veterans of the old avant-garde (Lajos Kassák, Ferenc Martyn, Dezső Korniss) meet artists of the younger generation (Imre Bak, György Jovánovics, László Lakner and Endre Tót).<sup>98</sup> By the end of the 1970s the repressive atmosphere created by the cultural policy of '3 x T' (Turni, Tiltani, Támogatni – Tolerate, Prohibit, Support) disappeared under the impact of the new economic regime of 'goulash

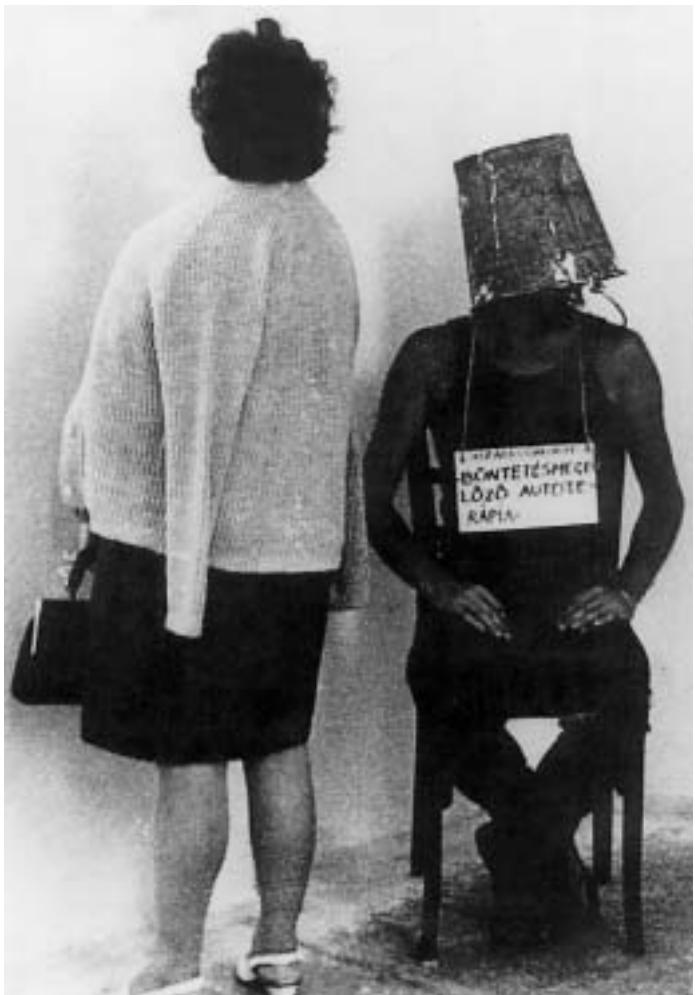
Communism'. By the mid-1970s, the country experienced gradual liberalization of the cultural policies as part of an effort to open the Hungarian economy to the West and to secure Western credits and manufacturing licenses, as well as encourage foreign investment. Because of the success of this strategy, even before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Hungary became a relatively 'safe' country for foreign investors and took the first steps towards economic reform. By the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, there was also a fundamental shift in the status of various groups. Some of the victims of the '3 x T' strategy were rehabilitated and even began receiving official support, in particular in the international arena. In 1985 there was even a conference organized in Budapest on the subject of censorship, a rather delicate subject in view of the fact that Communist censorship did not disappear with the introduction of the doctrine of the 'new economic mechanism'. The conference was definitely noticed in the West.<sup>99</sup>

That happened later. Let us return to the early 1970s and to my thesis about the civic, if not political, engagement of at least some of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde projects. The work of Tamás Szentjóby certainly falls within that category, in particular his project IPUT (International Parallel Union of



138. György Galántai,  
Stampwork,  
1979.

139. Tamás Szentjóby,  
*Expulsion Exercise. Punishment-Preventive Auto-Therapy*,  
1972.



Telecommunication).<sup>100</sup> The artist's works from the late 1960s, such as *Portable Trench for Three Persons* (1968), *Cooling Water* (1968) and *Czechoslovak Radio* (1968), discussed in the previous chapter, reveal Szentjóby's interest in political engagement. In 1972 the artist presented a work, *Expulsion Exercise. Punishment-Preventive Auto-Therapy* (illus. 139), at a gallery located in the Balatonboglár Chapel. Szentjóby sat for eight hours in the gallery with a bucket over his head. On the wall there was posted a list of questions that viewers could ask him:

Can one form a community with another person without being free  
oneself?

Is it the most important thing to discover and realize what is needed  
by life?

Can he stand without us or is everything hopeless?  
Can the blockade of the present be broken only by new attitude?  
Is the realization of the future in the present an acceleration of our lives?  
Does your action include the punishment?  
Does your punishment include the action?  
Do you feel particularly exposed because you cannot see whom you are  
talking to?<sup>101</sup>

The process of asking those simple questions created a situation that resembled an interrogation. At the same time, the bucket on the artist's head prevented eye contact and the identification of the individual asking the questions. His or her anonymity enhanced the discomfort of the interrogated artist.

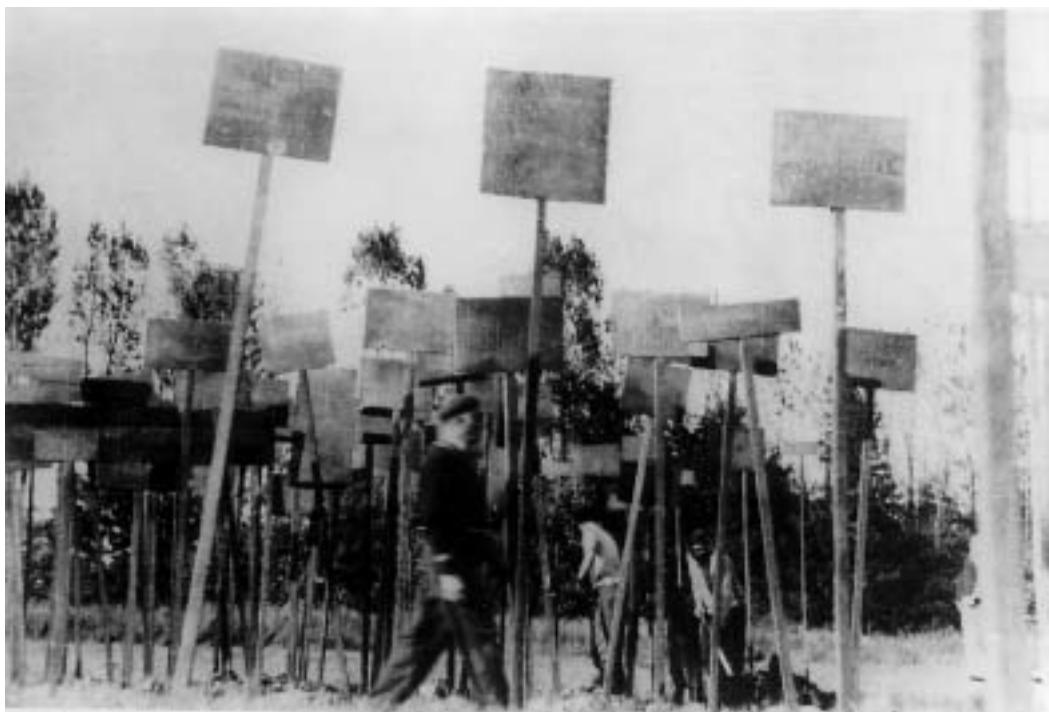
The psycho-masochistic character of the performance had two opposing impulses: on the one hand, it afforded an opportunity for the purification and expression of internalized anxieties, on the other it presumed the need for responsibility and punishment inscribed within this traumatic experience, a type of politico-psychanalytic session. According to psychoanalytic theory, re-experiencing a trauma activates the mechanism that eventually leads to healing. The potential and the actual police interventions into the artists' lives were a constant source of such trauma. Szentjóby's performance could be seen in this context as a form of therapy, an attempt to reprocess and desensitize the traumatic contact with the political police.

Several months later, in the performance *Sit out* (October 1972), the artist placed a black bandage in his mouth and tied himself to a chair in front of the Hotel Intercontinental in Budapest. After several minutes he was picked up by the police and placed under arrest. The performance was dedicated to Bobby Seale, the founder of the American Black Panther Party, who was ordered to be bound and gagged during one of his trials by the presiding judge. Although Communist Hungary officially supported the Civil Rights movement and took a stand against racism, it also wished to maintain a monopoly on any actions or statements of support. Any spontaneous or unofficial demonstrations would not be tolerated.

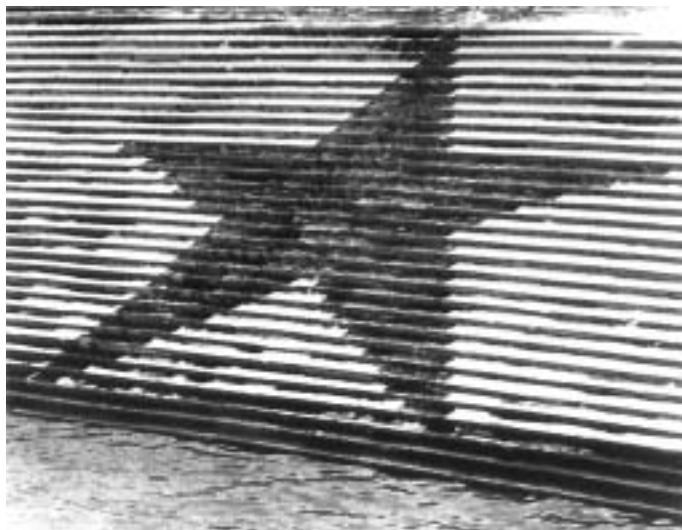
Gyula Pauer was another Hungarian artist whose work addressed such civic issues and who operated within a more or less precisely defined political sphere. He participated in a series of exhibitions held in Szürenon towards the end of the 1970s. In 1970 he published a manifesto, *Pseudo*, which described his approach as focusing on creating tensions between the sense of sight and touch, between that which was seen and that which existed in reality.<sup>102</sup> The appearance of his works suggested that they had qualities other than those that could be actually experienced. The artist created this function as a form of a 'cover' for the given object. For instance, Pauer would create an illusion of three

dimensions for a flat, two-dimensional object. This was the logic driving his 'pseudo-cubes', 'pseudo-reliefs', and so forth. He also used the same method in works that focused on the human body. For instance, in the 1970 work *Farewell to Pregnancy*, the artist hid the pregnancy of a female model. He painted her body to create an illusion that she was not pregnant. In 1978 he covered a figure of a female body carved from wood with a material that emulated the appearance of real skin (*Maya*, 1978). The visual experience created by such works was clearly 'false'. One experienced a dissonance between the declared and the perceived reality, a dissonance also associated with the schizophrenic discourse of Socialism and experienced by everyone living in the Eastern Bloc on a daily basis. This was the condition *sine qua non* of the countries that comprised the 'people's democracy'. This type of reading is also suggested by Pauer's directly political works.<sup>103</sup> In *Marx-Lenin* (1971), the viewer sees what appears to be the contours of a familiar image of Lenin, but when he removes the cover, the actual image turns out to be a newspaper photograph of a public monument consisting of Marx's head. In another work, *Yes-No* (1972), the viewer can read the 'correct' word only by looking at it through a transparent red sheet. The word 'Yes' changes to 'No' when it is seen through this lens. In 1978 Pauer created an installation in the Nagyatád park in

140. Gyula  
Pauer, *Forest  
of Signboards*,  
1978.



141. Gábor Attalai,  
*Negative Star*,  
1970.



Budapest entitled *Forest of Signboards* (illus. 140). The artist wrote mysterious, enigmatic and absurd texts on a grouping of the boards located in the park. The authorities, who interpreted the installation as a political statement, quickly removed it. And that is how the work should have been read, though the political significance of the inscriptions written on the boards did not result from their literal meaning.

Hungary presents a rather unique instance of the politically engaged neo-avant-garde. Elsewhere in the region, political allusions were either much less direct or, more often, entirely absent. One could say that the Hungarian neo-avant-garde artists not only made political allusions, but also engaged in a direct political critique. This difference is particularly apparent when one compares the history of the avant-garde practice in Hungary with that in Poland. While the history of the Polish neo-avant-garde produced a rich body of works and had a dynamic character, it was virtually devoid of directly expressed political critiques. This thesis is also supported by the fact that Hungarian artists frequently used Communist symbols in their works while their Polish colleagues seldom did so. Katalin Keserü attributed this to the influence of Pop art on the Hungarian neo-avant-garde. Of course, such usage had an ironic and therefore critical character. For instance, Gábor Attalai frequently created works that reproduced the form of a five-pointed star, but did so in very ephemeral materials, soft and easily destroyed, or present for a short period of time, such as snow. He thereby questioned the stability of the Communist symbols and its value, pointing to its ephemeral and transient character (*Negative Star*, 1970; illus. 141).<sup>104</sup>

Perhaps the best-known Hungarian artworks of this type are the actions and photographs created by Sándor Pinczehelyi, in particular his photographic self-portraits with a sickle and hammer, his works using the five-pointed star and those referencing the Hungarian national colours. It is notable that during the reign of the Communist political regime such references could be acknowledged only in a veiled form. Writing in 1974, László Beke noted that a star with a sickle and a hammer appears in the artist's work as an appropriated ready-made element, as well as an ordered geometric form. He adds only parenthetically that it can also function as a political symbol.<sup>105</sup>

Only after the end of the Communist censorship could the interpretation of Pinczehelyi's pieces address the more fundamental issues connected with the artist's use of political symbols (illus. 142).<sup>106</sup> Lóránd Hegyi, the author of a comprehensive monograph on the artist, cites an anecdote explaining the source of Pinczehelyi's interest in the star motif. In 1973 the artist was



142. Sándor Pinczehelyi, Hammer and Sickle, 1973. István Király Múzeum, Székesfehérvár.

supposedly operated on by a Soviet surgeon, a Red Army officer, who left a five-pointed star on the artist's forehead as a result of the operation.<sup>107</sup> This event motivated the artist to address the problem of politics by referencing a historic symbol and his individual experience. Of course, one must treat this story in the spirit in which it was intended, as an apocryphal tale. After all, Pinczeheleyi began his experiments with the star-form before 1973 and therefore prior to his 'operation'. As early as 1972 the artist arranged field stones into five-pointed stars. Moreover, as Hegyi demonstrated, this theme addressed the deeply embedded function of symbols within the social reality, in particular that of the East European countries. Hegyi suggested that, in general, Pinczeheleyi was interested in destroying the clarity and one-dimensionality of the symbol, in introducing tensions into its representation and intervening in the automatic association of the symbol with the Communist regime. Such a use of the five-pointed star suggests that it no longer functioned as a symbol representing a particular order of power, but as a decoration or an ornament used within the Communist iconosphere. One could also refer to Slavoj Žižek's analysis of the function of ideology to demonstrate that Pinczeheleyi's use of Communist symbols corresponded to the commonly 'decorative' and 'ornamental' use of ideology in Eastern Europe. This is connected to a cynical instrumentalization of the proclaimed values and a lack of faith in the efficacy of what is being declared, combined with a willingness to derive benefits from such use of the ideology.<sup>108</sup> The symbol is no more than an ornament, just as the ideology functions as an ornament of social and political life operating by a different set of values, in particular those linked to benefits and pleasures hidden by the ideological declarations.

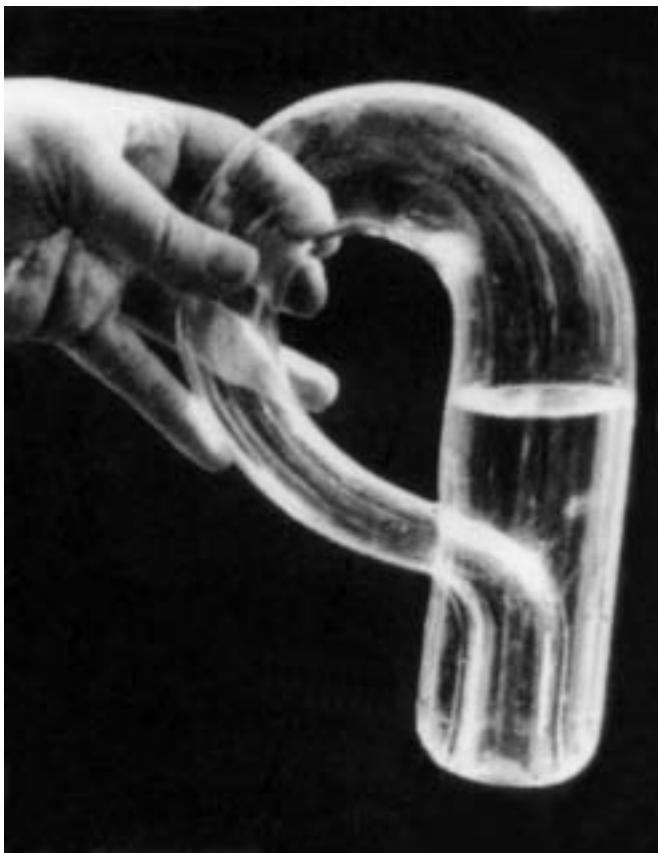
The artist suggests this type of reading by using ironic figures (the cited anecdote also functions in this context as a form of self-irony). Irony is the instrument of the artist's overall critical strategy. The series of photographs in which Pinczeheleyi used a real sickle and hammer, provides the most poignant example of such deconstruction of Communist symbols. The artist photographed himself in different situations with a real sickle and a real hammer, ordinary, physically present objects that never possessed the requisite symbolic power. Because the artist subjected them to a series of 'inappropriate' manipulations (packaging, bandaging, multiplying and so on), their awe-inspiring significance was, in a sense, disarmed. Pinczeheleyi photographed himself only with the sickle in different positions and poses, as well as with both elements of the Communist symbol, revealing the triviality of the objects and their absurdity when deprived of their ideological pathos. Hegyi noted that the trivialization and objectification allowed their ideological de-fetishization, de-sacralization and de-symbolization.<sup>109</sup>

The five-pointed star and the sickle and hammer were not the only symbols subjected to such treatment by the artist. Somewhat later, during the period of the developing ‘goulash Socialism’, Pinczehelyi also added the logo of Coca-Cola to his repertoire. When considered together with the artist’s work on the Communist emblems and the colours of the Hungarian flag, this decision points to his consistent and continuous strategy of the demystification of the contemporary iconosphere, the ironization of the new ideologies (this time spawned by consumer Socialism) and the de-fetishization of the next set of symbols with which the regime fed the society during this uniquely Hungarian process of the construction of Communism.

Pinczehelyi’s de-symbolizations are firmly situated within the framework of conceptual art, which became very popular among Hungarian artists in the 1970s. In addition to the artists already discussed, one should also mention László Lakner, Károly Halász and Dóra Maurer, as well as Miklós Erdély, one of the most charismatic and broadly ranging artists of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, who had a tremendous impact on the local art scene. ‘Thus when writing about Erdély’, wrote László Beke, ‘fundamental difficulties have to be faced, one is classification, the other is interpretation’.<sup>110</sup> The Hungarian critic avoids both by providing a detailed chronology of the artist’s life and work in the catalogue of Erdély’s first retrospective, which took place in 1986, after the artist’s death.<sup>111</sup> However, the second major exhibition, organized at the museum in Székesfehérvár, an institution actively involved in the promotion of Hungarian neo-avant-garde art, was more structural than historic.<sup>112</sup> The third exhibition, which took place in 1998 in Budapest Műcsarnok and collected the largest number of the artist’s works, is yet to contribute to this discourse since it was not accompanied by a catalogue. However, it did provide an excellent overview of the artist’s range over a period of several decades. It contained not only the artist’s works, but also significant documentation of his projects and his films. It also provided an opportunity for a symposium dedicated to Erdély’s films.

Although Erdély produced a very diverse body of works, the artist’s greatest contribution to the history of Hungarian neo-avant-garde was made in the 1970s. Erdély began his career in the 1950s, producing *Art informel*-inspired drawings. During the 1960s he turned to happening, creating such milestone works as *Lunch – in Memoriam Batu Khan* and *Golden Sunday*, both from 1966. He closed this chapter by forming the group INDIGO in the early 1970s with artists of a younger generation. During the 1970s and early 1980s Erdély produced some of his most interesting films.<sup>113</sup> The film *Vonatút/Train Trip* (1981), which could be seen as a culmination of those efforts, consisted of a repeating sequence of several frames filmed during a group train trip. Each

time the sequence repeats, the frames appear in a different order. The film ends when all possible combinations have been exhausted. This auto-analytic work, concerned with the formal structure of the medium of film, grew out of the atmosphere of the 1970s, when such formal projects constituted the mainstream of artistic explorations. During this period, Erdély produced a number of interesting works, sometimes very simple, other times much more complex. In each case the works are concerned with the analysis of the language and mythology of art rooted in the history of modern art. His piece *Last Year's Snow* (1970) consisted of a thermos that one assumed 'contained' a handful of snow from the previous winter, next to a vase of flowers. In *Klein-Jug* (illus. 143) Erdély created a motif of the Möbius Strip. In *Fidelity* (1979), using simple objects, such as scissors, knives and a white walking cane, the artist made references to Duchamp's ready-mades, sometimes directly, sometimes critically.<sup>114</sup> The work *Journey in Time* (illus. 144), which consisted of photomontage images showing the artist in the company of various individuals



143. Miklós  
Erdély,  
*Klein-Jug*, 1976.  
Miklós Erdély-  
Foundation,  
Budapest.

144. Miklós Erdély, *Journey in Time*, 1976.  
István Király Múzeum,  
Székesfehérvár.



from his past, including his childhood, revealed a different aspect of Erdély's interests. It explored on the one hand the artist's belief in the conventional character of temporal categories and, on the other, his nostalgic attitude towards his own past and biography, which he invoked as a private dimension and used as a material in his art.

Eszter Babarczy wrote that Erdély's work did not contain a 'message' or create knowledge about 'something'. Its communicative layer was 'empty'. It 'spoke' only about itself, about the endless process of artistic production, and therefore about free and undetermined creation. But it was not 'about' freedom as such. Rather it was in and of itself free; it created 'freedom as art'.<sup>115</sup> János Brendel provided a similar analysis, though in a somewhat different interpretive context. He emphasizes the absence of any system of art values in Erdély's work that could a priori determine what was art and what was not. According to Brendel, the artist strove to emphasize the need for continuous experimentation, endless denial and rejection of canons, values associated with the past and the necessity of permanent change.<sup>116</sup> Those types of interpretations

were based primarily on the artist's theoretical texts, in particular his *Thesis from Marly* and *Art as an Empty Sign*.<sup>117</sup>

Magdalena Radomska addressed Erdély in a much broader context, considering his theoretical statements and works, as well as the historic context and tensions that appear among those elements.<sup>118</sup> In her analysis the Hungarian artist appears as a multi-dimensional figure. Also, his conceptions of the 'empty sign' and freedom, when confronted with the artist's works, the political context of their production, the Duchampian tradition, the work of Joseph Kosuth and Joseph Beuys and the theories of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, acquire a new wealth of meanings. According to Radomska, the problem of an empty sign, a key concept in Erdély's theory of art, does not address the work itself but its reception. Neither involves, as Brendel suggested, a crisis of culture. The shift in codes used by the artist makes it difficult for the viewer to decode the work and to assign it a certain meaning. One could even say that it prevents such 'meaningful' reading. Because of that, the work is 'used' rather than understood. In a certain sense it cannot be 'understood' (hence the 'emptiness' of the sign), only 'used'. The tension between understanding and use is connected with the continuous and endless search for the inability to define the limits of art. Because those limits cannot be defined (they are 'empty'), anything can become art, anything can be 'used' as art, but also, as Radomska notes, nothing is art.<sup>119</sup>

Radomska also observed that the concept of the 'empty sign' is at the heart of Erdély's definition of art as well as freedom. Let us recall that Babarczy identified the artist's conception of art as a conception of freedom. This means that the artist's work is conceived in 'anarchist' terms, as a 'free' work. However, Radomska analysed that relationship in a different way. Just as the limits of art cannot be determined, neither can the limits of freedom. Accordingly, Erdély appears to reject the utopian conception of freedom that identifies it as the horizon of all expectations. Freedom is 'here and now'; it is fulfilled. If art is everything and nothing, then freedom, likewise, cannot belong to a particular political system, or be located outside of it, in exile. The conditions inside and outside are identical, an idea demonstrated by Erdély's *Klein-Jug*.<sup>120</sup>

Erdély's work still awaits a full and convincing historic analysis and interpretation, even though it appears to synthesize the basic historic path of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde. The artist's work and the Hungarian neo-avant-garde in general began to develop at the end of the 1960s in conjunction with the beginnings of the critique of Modernist painting. Erdély participated, for instance, in the second *IPARTEV* exhibition held in 1969. Moving away from the artist, but continuing to draw the map of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, one should also mention the exhibitions organized in Szürenon, which included

works by Gyula Pauer. In 1970 György Galántai transformed his sculpture studio in Balatonboglár into a gallery that would play a crucial role in the development of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde during its three years of existence. The headquarters of the Club of Young Artists in Budapest became another key venue for the exhibition of neo-avant-garde works. Although the club had an official status, under the leadership of László Beke, who became its director in 1974, it pursued a programme of exhibitions that was fundamentally at odds with the official cultural policies of the regime. Beke, who collaborated with the Polish organizers of the NET, proposed in 1971 a project named 'Work of Art-Documentation of an Idea', in which 31 artists participated. Conceptual art generally developed in a dynamic fashion, supported by such critics as Beke and Géza Perneczky as well as institutions like the museum in Székesfehérvár. Although Erdély did not participate in all those initiatives, his position within the map of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde does function as an important reference point.

Beside the artists who grouped around Erdély in the late 1960s, there appeared a younger generation in the mid-1970s sometimes described as 'post-Fluxus conceptualists'. They would meet and sometimes stage performances at the Rózsa Espresso café, located across the street from the Budapest Academy of Fine Arts. This group of younger artists was fully aware of the art produced by the older generation of neo-avant-garde artists, many of whom had left the country (Lakner, Szentjóby, Tót). Erdély functioned in this context as both a link and an intellectual lynchpin by creating in 1978 the art group INDIGO based on the principle of 'interdisciplinary thinking' (INterDIsciplináris GOndalkodás). INDIGO was a loosely configured group of mainly younger artists who wished to pursue a multifaceted and completely anti-academic development through collective projects, collaborations, and visual as well as acoustic presentations.<sup>121</sup> One can observe the shift in sensibility when one compares the 1966 happening *Lunch – In Memoriam Batu Khan* staged by Gábor Altoray, Tamás Szentjóby and Erdély, discussed in the previous chapter, with performances by Tibor Hajas, the rising star of the Hungarian art scene in the mid-1970s, in which the absurdist atmosphere of play associated with Fluxus gave way to the pathos of existential tensions.<sup>122</sup> Paradoxically, Erdély's engagement with INDIGO demonstrates that the artist maintained a key position in the 'post-Fluxus' Hungarian art scene, despite the fact that by the 1980s the purism of the conceptual discourse of the 1970s had given way to a much more dynamic expression, focused on the body and sensuality.

The situation in Poland and Yugoslavia in the early 1970s was quite different from that in Hungary and changed in the opposite direction from the one

described in Czechoslovakia. At a time when the authorities in Budapest were still viewing modern art, especially neo-avant-garde circles, with suspicion, and those in Prague were pursuing ‘normalization’, the Communist regime holding power in Poland experienced a fundamental realignment in a more liberal direction. In 1970 the Polish police and army opened fire on a demonstration by striking workers of the Gdańsk Shipyards, who were protesting the rising cost of food. Several dozen people were killed. Although this incident ended the worker’s revolt, the politicians who were held responsible for the situation, in particular Władysław Gomułka, the First Secretary of the Polish Communist Party, were forced to resign. The new leadership of the party, headed by Edward Gierek, loosened considerably the relatively limited restrictions imposed on Polish culture by allowing the neo-avant-garde to function freely within the official institutional framework. One could say that the authorities gave up trying to control the stylistic expression of contemporary art and deciding what types of art should and should not be practised in a socialist country. From the early 1970s on, all types of art practice were allowed and accepted. Everything, that is, except explicitly political art. Artists were free to do what they wished as long as they stayed away from politics. Their freedom was limited; it was a caged freedom. Every artist could express himself in whatever form he liked, but he could not express all ideas. He had to keep silent on political topics.

Any suggestion of a critique of the system of power or its institutions would be automatically suppressed by the censors, though apparently the Polish censors were not particularly busy. The artists were fully aware of the limits of their freedom and, in most cases, did not have any desire to test those limits. The majority were quite satisfied with the status quo and were highly opportunistic.<sup>123</sup> The reaction against Socialist Realist indoctrination, a legacy of the 1950s ‘thaw’, which engendered a general refusal to engage art in any way with the political processes, encouraged such conformist attitudes. This tradition held that art’s freedom was guaranteed by its autonomy and disengagement, which was proportional to the political engagement forced upon art during the period of Socialist Realism. This worldview entrenched the Modernist system of values and connected it with the neo-avant-garde, and therefore with the postmodern stylistic approaches associated in the West with a critique of Modernism.<sup>124</sup> One therefore sees in Poland a very interesting shift in emphasis. On the one hand, the reception of the neo-avant-garde (postmodern art) took place in the context of a Modernist system of values guided by such concepts as the autonomy of the artwork. On the other hand, it was informed by an accommodating opportunism of artists who did not wish to question the status quo and who respected the limits of ‘free’ expression defined by the Communist party.

The concept of post-totalitarianism formulated by Václav Havel in 1978 provides a rather apt characterization of the situation in Poland in the 1970s.<sup>125</sup> One could even say that it described much more accurately the situation in Poland under the Gierek regime than in Czechoslovakia under the Husák regime. The essence of post-totalitarianism is revealed when compared with classical totalitarianism. Havel writes:

The profound difference between our system – in terms of the nature of power – and what we traditionally understand by dictatorship, a difference I hope is clear even from this quite superficial comparison, has caused me to search for some term appropriate for our system . . . If I refer to it henceforth as a *post-totalitarian* system, I am fully aware that this is perhaps not the most precise term, but I am unable to think of a better one. I do not wish to imply by the prefix ‘post-’ that the system is no longer totalitarian; on the contrary, I mean that it is totalitarian in a way fundamentally different from classical dictatorships, different from totalitarianism as we usually understand it.<sup>126</sup>

According to Havel, there are several key differences between classical dictatorship and post-totalitarianism. The first is the function of the system under the conditions of a certain social stability, namely within the context of its own tradition and within the context of acceptance by the society of the functional tenets of the control system. The system is no longer new; on the contrary, it reveals a certain continuity and functions within a previously defined political territory. The next difference is related to the conviction that the functioning system is not an isolated island, an enclave detached from the world order; instead it appears to be inscribed into that order and to be an integral part of the global structure. The disappearance of the identifying marks of difference, grounded during the heroic phase of dictatorship in ideological claims, causes the gradual fading of ideology. In the post-totalitarian phase, ideology functions as an alibi, a convention used by the rulers in communication with the ruled; it is a communicative ritual. Such rhetorical ritualization conceals the pragmatism of power, the unwritten agreement between the political class and the society, which guarantees political stability. The post-totalitarian society gives up the right to democracy, and hence the right to rule. In return, the regime guarantees its economic security. The ritualization of ideology replaces the metaphysics of revolution and masks the real values of the new order, which mirror those of the Western consumer culture. Havel writes:

If an atmosphere of revolutionary excitement, heroism, dedication, and boisterous violence on all sides characterizes classical dictatorship, then the last traces of such an atmosphere have vanished from the Soviet bloc. For some time now this block has ceased to be a kind of enclave, isolated

from the rest of the developed world and immune to processes occurring in it. To the contrary, the Soviet bloc is an integral part of that larger world . . . This means in concrete terms that the hierarchy of values existing in the developed countries of the West has, in essence, appeared in our society . . . In other words, what we have here is simply another form of the consumer and industrial society, with all its concomitant social, intellectual, and psychological consequences. It is impossible to understand the nature of power in our system properly without taking this into consideration.<sup>127</sup>

This change in the system of power brings with it a change in the system of social control. Following Foucault's lead, one could say that the system of 'command and punishment' typical of the classical dictatorship is replaced during the post-totalitarian phase by a system of 'discipline and surveillance', similar to the modern West's panoptic disciplinary system.<sup>128</sup> While the Eastern variant of that system was much less refined and much more physically brutal, it was nonetheless markedly different from the large-scale terror of the classic Stalinist dictatorships.

Poland in the 1970s was a perfect example of the post-totalitarian system. Its regime ritualized ideology and practised panoptic surveillance, while the society embraced consumer values under the conditions of fundamental scarcity of consumer goods. The authorities went so far as to allow a certain degree of tolerance for political opposition, something that would have been unthinkable in the context of classical dictatorship. In the second half of the 1970s the dissident circles were infiltrated and watched rather than eliminated. The repressions that they suffered more often took the form of harassment than terror, with notable exceptions. The freedom of the society was naturally limited and precisely defined. This was particularly true within the cultural sphere, where the rules of the game were quite clear. As I mentioned earlier, the regime allowed a certain amount of freedom of artistic expression, but only within the sphere of formal experimentation. The price of such 'freedom' was the complete withdrawal from politics, a territory exclusively owned by the post-totalitarian regime. Any attempt to engage in a politically critical discourse directed against the authorities would have ended that limited freedom. To use Miklós Haraszti's term, the artist lived in a 'velvet prison'<sup>129</sup> and he knew the price of that velvet lining. As the regime enlarged the cage, giving the artist greater freedom of expression, his desire to break out faded. His political indifference ensured that his prison was lined with velvet. In return, the regime demanded from him neutrality, lack of criticism and respect for ritual linguistic conventions, as well as active production, formal experimentation and the use of Modernist or rather postmodernist stylistic approaches that could attest to the 'modernity' and 'Occidentalism' of the post-totalitarian society. The regime

of the 1970s did not need Socialist Realist propaganda. It required modern but uncritical art that did not question the status quo and respected the post-totalitarian social order, an order that was both totalitarian and consumerist, or more precisely, post-totalitarian and pre-consumerist.<sup>130</sup> The same mechanisms could be observed in the 1970s in Yugoslavia.

Many Polish artists took advantage of this situation. A series of documents smuggled to the West by a Kraków censor and published there revealed that the regime had a great deal of tolerance regarding the visual arts.<sup>131</sup> The art criticism also respected the status quo and did not take any steps to reveal the real mechanisms behind the functioning of Polish culture in the 1970s.<sup>132</sup> The smuggled censorship documents demonstrate no traces of intervention into texts dealing with art, which means that there were no attempts at the potentially politically sensitive analysis that would have required such interventions. Moreover, it is noteworthy that when the so-called ‘second circuit’ of illegal but tolerated publications was created in the second half of the 1970s, publications that were produced and distributed outside the official channels monitored by the censorship, that channel did not include articles dealing with fine arts. Those began appearing only under martial law in the 1980s. The first and only underground periodical dedicated entirely to the arts was the journal *Sketches (Szkice)*, which began to appear in 1984. Therefore it was not only art that embraced a fundamentally uncritical attitude; so did art criticism.

A brief review of chronology provides a telling commentary on the Polish art scene. In 1976, KOR, the Committee for the Workers’ Defence (Komitet Obrony Robotników) was formed after a new wave of workers’ demonstrations and confrontations with police in Radom and Ursus, an industrial town located near Warsaw. KOR functioned as the first organized instance of political opposition. It would eventually develop into the independent worker’s union, Solidarity. The same year Jan Świdziński created the manifesto of contextual art, which seemed to move in the direction of a more critical attitude towards the reality. Świdziński’s manifesto, announced in Poland and abroad (Lund, Sweden, and Toronto, Canada), subjected conceptual art to a radical critique. Following on the heels of the self-critique of conceptualism formulated a year earlier by Joseph Kosuth and the group Art and Language, the Polish artist indicted the hermetic self-referentiality and isolation of conceptual art from the contemporary social and political problems. Świdziński advocated art that would be ‘completed’ by the context, one whose meaning was defined by the context. The artist preferred, however, to limit himself to purely theoretical statements that were never translated into concrete instances of criticism.

Such theorizing was much safer than action in a post-totalitarian state. The state’s permissive attitude towards politically uncritical or pseudo-critical

statements formulated in the language of the neo-avant-garde, postmodernism, or any other art trend, its financial support for art galleries and venues, conferences and exhibitions, something that could not be taken for granted in the other countries of the Eastern Bloc, was commonplace in Poland. The regime needed the artists, but the artists also needed the regime. The possibility of working in the public sphere and having access to state subsidies was simply too significant a privilege to be jeopardized by production of ‘undesirable’ art. This type of accommodation entrenched conformist attitudes observed by Havel across the entire social spectrum of the post-totalitarian society, from managers of food stores to party officials. The game played by the artists was therefore not an exception, but the norm that defined the entire system of power. Conformism exemplified by uncritical or pseudo-critical art was the basis of what Michel Foucault referred to as the function of the ‘microphysics of power’, and as such was the core mechanism underpinning the functioning of the Polish art scene.

The fear that one could lose the possibility of practising art in the public sphere and of having access to fellowships, grants and subsidies not only paralyzed Polish artists, but also entrenched conformist attitudes, sometimes promoted in a form of manifestos, transforming them into positive values or models for action. One of the artists active during this period wrote:

Conformism functions as a proper antidote against the less than serious conceptions calling for the destruction of the reality . . . one has to think, not give way to emotions, [strive] for self-realization here and now, in this country, under the current conditions. One has to respect the current rules against utopian thinking . . .<sup>133</sup>

The author’s reference to ‘less than serious conceptions’ and ‘utopian thinking’ probably referred to the forming political opposition embodied by KOR and created just two years earlier, which would eventually evolve into the largest European workers’ union, Solidarity, and would contribute to the overthrow of the Communist regime in Poland.

What is particularly interesting is the fact that conformist tendencies were especially visible in the sphere of visual arts; they were far less common in literature. In general, Poles, unlike citizens of the other Eastern European countries, felt relatively free. This was particularly apparent when compared with the situation in the post-normalized Czechoslovakia. Polish intellectuals, or at least some of them, engaged in a quasi-open critique of the regime within the dynamically developing sphere of the second-circuit publications. Many writers, deprived of the possibility to publish their books through official channels, began contributing in growing numbers to the underground press

and playing an increasingly significant role in the evolving critique of the system. As a result, there appeared mounting tensions between the official and the independent writers. Such tensions were, however, entirely absent within the Polish art scene of the 1970s. There was no alternative art scene and no ethos of the (politically) independent artist who engaged in a systematic and uncompromising critique of the regime. The Polish tradition of seeing artists as perpetual ‘outsiders’, self-absorbed in the problems of formal autonomy (only secondarily interpreted as a rejection of the popular taste and social norms) played a role here as well. By contrast, literature, in particular poetry, was connected in the Polish cultural tradition with the ethos of resistance, struggle for independence and service to the nation. This difference distinguished the situation in Poland from that in Czechoslovakia, where the visual arts played a much more significant role in the local cultural traditions. It is likely that this was also one of the reasons why Polish censors were not that interested in the visual arts. The factors that stimulated the development of openly politically critical tendencies in Polish literature were almost entirely missing from Polish visual arts.

This does not mean, however, that programmatically uncritical art that avoided directly political statements was insured against any conflict with the authorities. Andrzej Turowski writes that a conflict of values was always present. The regime preferred ‘undistinguished’ art, safe and superficial. This type of ‘pseudo-avant-garde’ work, conformist and unambitious, resulting in trite and predictable projects and serving up shallow intellectual values, was very comfortable for the regime pursuing the strategy of pseudo-liberalization. Art that probed deeper questions and provoked discussion, which attacked the system from inside out by challenging its sponsorship of superficiality, was inherently dangerous.<sup>134</sup> This view of the conflict of values as a critique of the regime seems rather idealist. Nevertheless, if one accepts the accuracy of Slavoj Žižek’s description of the function of ideology in a Communist state, then one has to conclude that it was rooted in pragmatic opportunism. It was based on an exclusively discursive and rhetorical definition of a particular system of values that obscured the fact that those in power and those collaborating with or accommodating the power structure derived real benefits from their cooperation, and that those benefits had nothing to do with the publicly espoused views.<sup>135</sup> This theory provides an accurate description of the society’s conformism as well as the regime’s strategy. Under such conditions, any apparent or rhetorical breach of the implicit understanding could destabilize the precarious arrangement. An offer of a serious discussion in a situation when everyone pretended to be already engaged in discussion could have had real consequences for how one understood the world. Under those circum-

stances, the articulation of particular values, intellectual engagement and the development of critical perception of the environment could have had even greater impact than conventional critical contestation.

Although there were not many instances of the latter in Poland, there were some examples of politically engaged art worth mentioning. Anastazy Wiśniewski was clearly one of the most consistent Polish 'contesters'. He produced pamphlets and posters and staged protests against both the official and semi-official culture at art conferences and official art meetings. He also wrote 'official notes' on various occasions which used the language and conventions of the bureaucracy and provided information about (or rather informed on) the real and probable art events. Wiśniewski also practised what he described as 'positive negation' through the galleries Yes and No, which he created in the early 1970s and which existed only as a concept.

Przemysław Kwiek and Zofia Kulik, a pair of artists known collectively as KwieKulik, also played a similar role. In the late 1970s they organized a series



145.  
Przemysław  
Kwiek & Zofia  
Kulik, *Actions  
on the Head*,  
1978.

of metaphoric performances that had clearly political, if indirectly stated, meanings. For instance, in *Actions on the Head* (illus. 145), the pair appeared in a gallery wearing buckets filled with trash on their heads, which signified the ‘pollution’ of the minds by the discursive strategies of the Communist state. A two-part happening, *Good* and *Stańczyk*, organized in 1977 by Elżbieta and Emil Cieślar in their Warsaw Repassage Gallery, also used such metaphors, though in a more ironic manner. During the first part of the happening the participants shouted ‘good, good, good . . .’ (*dobrze, dobrze, dobrze . . .*) to the tune of popular, upbeat songs (illus. 146). The second part of the performance used the figure of Stańczyk, the mythologized king’s fool, who had foreseen the dangers awaiting his country. Initially, Stańczyk, dressed in his traditional red suit, sat sadly in the gallery. When he was re-painted white, he became happy (illus. 147). The performance subjected to an ironic commentary both the optimism of the official propaganda produced by the Gierek regime as well as the colour symbology – white and red – of the Polish national flag



146 Elżbieta Cieślar and Emil Cieślar, *Good*, 1977. Galeria Repassage, archive of the Museum of the Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw.

147. Elżbieta Cieślar and Emil Cieślar, Stańczyk, 1977. Galeria Repassage, archive of the Museum of the Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw.



and the colour red of Communism (apparently not well tolerated by Stańczyk).

The symposium and exhibition *Wrocław '70*, which took place just a few months before the Gierek regime came to power, revealed for the first time the existence of significant conceptual tendencies in Polish art, tendencies that would lead later to the full development of the Polish neo-avant-garde.<sup>136</sup> Although the scope of the art presented in Wrocław was much broader, the conceptual projects, such as Zbigniew Gostomski's *It Begins in Wrocław*, which proposed a systematic, grid-like distribution of elements across the surface of the entire globe starting from Wrocław, have been particularly noted by Polish art historians. While Gostomski's total and 'impossible' project, which has since functioned as a canonical conceptual project within the art history of Polish 1970s art, was clearly one of the first instances of conceptual approach

to art in Poland, it was neither the first, nor the only such work presented in Wrocław. Anastazy Wiśniewski, the earlier mentioned contestor of the Polish art scene, responded to the mythologizing of the symposium by subversively re-titling Gostomski's project in his 'official notes' as *It Ended in Wrocław*. Nevertheless, the importance of *Wrocław '70* rests in the fact that it was the first event that gathered together a significant number of artists approaching art-making through conceptual categories: Jerzy Federowicz, Zdzisław Jurkiewicz, Barbara Kozłowska, Jarosław Kozłowski, Zbigniew Makarewicz and Maria Michałowska. The symposium's format as such was not a major innovation. It was part of a well-established tradition of exhibitions and meetings, sometimes referred to as *plener* (originally *plein-air* field trips, though in this incarnation having nothing to do with the outdoor painting), which were regularly organized throughout the 1960s and '70s in Elbląg, Puławy, Osieki, Zielona Góra and other Polish cities. Poland was not unique in this respect either. Similar events were organized in the Hungarian towns of Villány, Dunaujváros, Györ and Velem.

What distinguished Poland among the East European countries was the large number of galleries functioning outside the official exhibition circuit. Although other countries of the region, in particular in East Germany, developed similar 'unofficial' venues in the 1970s, the Polish ones continued the tradition begun in the previous decade and during the 1970s multiplied to an unprecedented number. The Warsaw Foksal Gallery had a special symbolic significance for the entire region. It was created in 1966 by the initiative of three art critics, Wiesław Borowski, Hanna Ptaszkowska and Mariusz Tchorek. They were joined in the early 1970s by the art critic and historian Andrzej Turowski. Krzysztof Wodniczko, connected with Foksal during this period, later stressed that Turowski played a key role in shaping the thinking of his colleagues. When he joined the gallery as a young art historian of Constructivism, he introduced Marxist methodology into its strategies and tactics. This constituted, according to Wodniczko, a significant shift, since until then the critics and the artists associated with the gallery tended to look to Surrealism. Turowski's presence led to the joining of a morally based critique of the official art scene with a social critique and self-critique of the institutions comprising that scene.<sup>137</sup>

From its beginnings, the Foksal Gallery engaged in revisionism, contesting its own official and conventional status as a gallery while insisting on the autonomy of art and supporting artists who tended to explore its internal structures. Foksal's programmatic document, *Introduction to the General Theory of the Place* (1966), stated, 'The PLACE is a sudden gap in the utilitarian approach to the world. The PLACE arises, when all the laws holding in the world

are suspended. The PLACE is one and indivisible'.<sup>138</sup> The gallery was supposed to function as such an autonomous and isolated place. It was unconventional in so far as it did not 'host exhibitions', or create situations secondary to the works themselves or merely arranged them for public presentation. Instead, it provided a place for creation and production of 'living' art. The gallery as 'the place' was supposed to be, according to the critics who formed it, 'non-transparent'; it was supposed to have a real and autonomous presence.

But the power of institutional habits endemic to the gallery system was indeed very strong. The gallery's organizers, feeling that those habits endangered the autonomy of 'the place', responded by producing a text 'What is it that we like about Foksal Gallery?' Turowski also wrote an important essay on this subject entitled 'Gallery Against Gallery', which deconstructed the concept of a gallery as such. His goal was to reveal as well as articulate the tensions inherent in the concept. The critic felt that only such dynamic conception could accommodate both the idea of the gallery as 'the place' and the work of art understood in terms of autonomous values. He wrote:

At present the gallery cannot attenuate the controversy presented above and typical for the still existing culture – the contrast between object (documentation), thought (act of creation), institution (forms of comprising the activity). The gallery can only preserve the tensions existing between them because it is not the function of the gallery to change the patterns of culture. The institutional culture and this – in our understanding – is a compromise. Worse, it is further usurping the right of forcing one's own decisions upon the facts.<sup>139</sup>

This was not a Marxist critique directed against the institutional system as such; it was an analysis of the complex and often opposing forces that acted and had to act on the gallery if it were to fulfil its mission as 'the place'. The main goal of that mission was the defence of the work (the fact). If the gallery was to be as near as possible to the avant-garde work, it could not cease to function; it had to defend the language of the avant-garde and could do so only by existing. The gallery could not give up its status; it could only question and continually revise its position. It focused on the defence of artistic values, of the autonomous and neutral work. Such work was situated between 'transmission and reception . . . in the moment that renders it neutrally real – in which the psychological presence of the artist is already absent – in which [the work] has not yet been subjected to schematizing function of interpretation'.<sup>140</sup> Such isolation embodied the essence of the Modernist utopia of the absolutely pure work, independent of all external pressures and manipulations, situated in the sphere of autonomous existence, outside the institutions, politics, economy

and society. Foksal is, therefore, an excellent example of the earlier mentioned connection between neo-avant-garde practice and the Modernist value system.

Foksal Gallery regularly exhibited works by the leading artists of the international art scene, such as Robert Barry, Christian Boltanski, Daniel Buren, Victor Burgin, Ben Vautier and Lawrence Weiner. Several Polish artists were also permanently associated with the gallery. The older generation was represented by Henryk Stażewski, the father of the Polish avant-garde, and Tadeusz Kantor, the younger generation by such artists as Zbigniew Gostomski and Krzysztof Wodiczko.<sup>141</sup> Some works of these artists clearly went beyond the Modernist programme espoused by the gallery. This was certainly the case with Wodiczko, whose works engaged in a dialogue with the artistic tradition that sometimes respected its boundaries and other times breached them. The



148. Krzysztof Wodiczko,  
*Ladder*, 1975.  
Muzeum Sztuki,  
Łódź.

artist's work *Ladder* (illus. 148), which deconstructed mimetic illusionism by revealing its conventional character, is an example of the first dialogic mode. Wodiczko reversed the process of representation by making his ladder, a real, physically present object, according to a foreshortened perspective drawing, which functioned as its model. This reversal of the normal order – first the representation (an illusionist drawing of the ladder), then the real object (the ladder itself) – undermined the faith in mimesis revealing the conventional (rather than necessary) character of the relationship between the object and the image.

In another work, *References*, shown in the Foksal Gallery in 1977, the artist also engaged in the deconstruction of the external apparatus of the artistic tradition. Wodiczko projected slides onto three screens, each dissected by a line: a vertical line dissected the screen showing images of various representations of power (church towers, obelisks, monuments and so on); a horizontal line dissected the screen showing photographs of various aspects of social life (apartment blocks, lines of shoppers) that formed readily apparent allusions to real socialism; a diagonal line dissected the screen showing reproductions of the great masterpieces of European painting. It is likely that this project provided the original impetus for the artist's well-known later projections.

The various types of vehicles that the artist created after leaving Poland, are likewise rooted in one of his early, paradigmatic projects, *The Vehicle* (illus. 149). Wodiczko provided the following description of *The Vehicle*: 'The artist walks back and forth along an inclined platform causing its back and forth movement. This movement is transferred by a series of gears and pulleys to the wheels and the vehicle moves forward. The vehicle moves in a uniform fashion, in a straight line, and only in one direction. *The Vehicle* moves only forward and is reserved exclusively for the artist's use'.<sup>142</sup> This terse description serves as a form of introduction to the work's analysis provided by Turowski. The critic wrote that *The Vehicle*,

was not characterized by technical perfection, despite the fact that it was conceived with engineering precision. It had more in common with the dream of *Letatlin* than with shiny surfaces and aerodynamic shapes of contemporary bolides. Given a trial run on the streets of Warsaw, one could say it was 'exquisitely functional'; its function was realized by the fact that 'movement in place' of the walking artist caused the movement of the entire vehicle 'forward'. The function and the progress, or rather the caricature version of the fallen Icarus of Vladimir Tatlin's utopia and socially useful Bauhaus machines, allows one to see in this first vehicle the beginnings of [the artist's] later conception of the critical project as an art project.<sup>143</sup>



As noted by Turowski, Wodiczko subjected the engineering artistic utopias of the Soviet Constructivists such as Tatlin to an ironic commentary. But that was not his only objective. *The Vehicle* moved exclusively in the forward direction, irrespective of the direction of the movement of the walking artist. There was only one condition – the artist had to keep on walking. This metaphoric irony was directed not only against constructivist utopias, but also against a dialectic approach to history. After all, the official ideological doctrine of materialist dialectic held that, irrespective of the direction of the movement, one always moved forward.

Wodiczko's later projects and proposals for vehicles, such as *Vehicle-Café*, *Vehicle-Platform*, or *Vehicle-Podium*,<sup>144</sup> which anticipated his well-known *Homeless Vehicles*, and *Poliscars*, provided ironic commentary on East European cultural experiences. *Vehicle-Café* moved in response to spoken words, a peculiar type of 'chatter' that dominated the political habits of the region. The café functioned under the Communist regime as a quasi-political institution. It was a place where intellectuals met, commented on the current events, and debated political plans. They usually spoke in low voices so that the secret police agents sitting at the neighbouring table would have a more difficult time

149. Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Vehicle*, 1973, courtesy Krzysztof Wodiczko (reconstruction: Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź).

listening in. The latter often sat around cafés ‘just in case’, to monitor prevalent opinion. This clearly indicated that the Communist regime did not ignore the function of the café as an oppositional institution, one that continued the long-standing East European (if not European) tradition of political debate over coffee. The next vehicles, *Vehicle-Platform* and *Vehicle-Podium*, referred to another form of ‘chatter’, namely the ritual of never-ending political speeches, many of which could last more than six hours. This tiresome custom, which currently survives only in China, North Korea and Cuba, forced thousands of individuals living in the Communist countries to listen to tirades that attempted to drown the unappealing reality in a torrent of brain-numbing discourse. Just as in the first vehicle, irrespective of what was being said, the contraption moved forward in accordance with the principles of dialectic materialism. Wodiczko seemed to also suggest that the movement was caused not only by the speeches made at the ‘podium’ but also by the ‘café gossip’ and ‘café opposition’.

If Foksal Gallery saw its own institutional status as a problem and continually ‘struggled’ to resolve it, Poznań-based Gallery Akumulatory 2 solved that dilemma at its inception. The Gallery was created in 1972 as part of Andrzej Kostołowski’s and Jarosław Kozłowski’s NET initiative and from its inception encompassed an international group of artists interested in forming and maintaining an artistic exchange without any desire for compensation. NET as such did not have an institutional dimension. Kozłowski always maintained, however, that the gallery did function as a type of institution (or rather quasi-institution), though it certainly had an anti-institutional or a-institutional image.<sup>145</sup> It was an international gallery that had no administrative support, no staff and no real budget. It received meagre financial support from the students’ union that owned the club space where the gallery functioned, but those funds only allowed production and distribution of exhibition announcements. There were no catalogues or any other forms of documentation. Kozłowski, together with the art history students at the Adam Mickiewicz University, cleaned the gallery, painted the walls and installed the exhibitions. One could even say that there was no autonomous gallery space as such, since the room used for exhibitions was each time ‘borrowed’ from the student club. Later, when in the 1970s the gallery changed institutional affiliation from the Adam Mickiewicz University to the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań, it used various temporary spaces.

Gallery Akumulatory 2 did not have a defined programme. Although Kozłowski selected artists for the exhibitions, he did not do so according to a well-articulated mission, but according to extra- and anti-institutional criteria.<sup>146</sup> He did not proscribe what the invited artists were supposed to show.

'We never had any say in the works that were exhibited or executed in the gallery', he wrote. 'Whatever happened did so exclusively by the artist's decision. By inviting an artist, we gave him our complete trust'.<sup>147</sup> Yet despite such assurances of even-handedness, the gallery was perceived, especially in the 1970s, as a venue focused on conceptual art. It should be noted that Kozłowski's own work approached conceptualism, and a significant portion of artists whose works were exhibited by the gallery (Victor Burgin, Douglas Heubler) could be identified with that tendency. But there were also other artists, such as Carlfriedrich Claus, Joel Fisher, Richard Long, Reiner Ruthenbeck, Petr Štembera, Franz Erhard Walther and various Fluxus affiliates, who cannot be as easily classified. What bound them together was a search for a marginal location vis-à-vis the institutional art circuits, not only in the Polish context but in general. The gallery's existence revealed a real crisis of commercial and official art institutions. But it also provided evidence, contravening the institutional system and the art market, that the international art scene could function as if the world was not divided into the West and the East simply through the power of private networks and contacts.

The Gallery Akumulatory 2 revealed another important characteristic of the map of the Polish neo-avant-garde of the 1970s, namely its decentralization. Although the Polish art scene still centred on Warsaw, dynamic alternative art centres were also developing elsewhere, in particular in Łódź and Wrocław, and to a lesser extent Poznań. The *Wrocław '70* symposium, which functions as a milestone in the most recent Polish art history, of course took place in Wrocław. One of its contributions was the unrealized project for Museum of Current Art, which was supposed to function as a centre dedicated to documentation of contemporary art. The city's art scene was formed by several important galleries, in particular Under the Mona Lisa and Permafo, and a number of leading artists, such as Jan Chwałczyk, Stanisław Dróżdż, Wanda Gołkowska, Natalia ŁL (Lach-Lachowicz) and Jerzy Rosołowicz. Łódź had a somewhat different status, largely due to the fact that it was home to one of the oldest museums dedicated to modern art and one of the most interesting film schools in Europe.

In 1970 a group of artists afflicted with the Łódź Film School formed the Workshop of the Film Form. The group challenged not only the school's curriculum, but also, more generally, the state policies on film, in particular narrative cinema. The core of the Workshop was formed by the members of another collective, Zero-69, formed earlier in Toruń (Wojciech Bruszewski, Michał Kokot, Antoni Mikołajczyk, Józef Robakowski and Andrzej Różycki), which focused on the analysis or rather self-analysis of the photographic language. The Workshop also had other members: at various times, in addition

to the Toruń group, it was joined by Janusz Kołodrubiec, Tomasz Konart, Paweł Kwiek, Andrzej Paruzel, Janusz Połom, Zbigniew Rybczyński, Ryszard Waśko and others. The statement issued by the Workshop declared:

The Workshop produces: films, recording and television programs, audio programmes, exhibitions of visual arts, events, interventions. The Workshop also engages in critical and theoretical work. It does not engage in any commercial practice and its participants work on a volunteer basis. The Workshop conducts research and it has the objective to enhance the potential of audio-visual art in conjunction with the current tendencies in contemporary art.<sup>148</sup>

Józef Robakowski explained further,

I definitely tried to eliminate in my films the need for literary statement. I think that literature is the exact opposite of film. I wish to come closer in my attempts to a-literary film . . . Right now, I want to make a film, *Gymnastics*. Through special editing, by varying the speed, the camera's point of view, the set, or by capturing different phases of the movement combined in a special way, the film will give the effect of 'gymnastics' possible to capture only in a film sequence. I make all those attempts in order to find and explore certain qualities specific to film because I think that contemporary man's habits of thinking in terms of literature have degraded the phenomenon of film and have taken away its unique character.<sup>149</sup>

This emphasis on non-commercial work and the 'purity' of the film language were certainly intended as a critique of commercial movies. But they were also directed against the more pervasive mechanisms that determined the function of the Polish film in the 1970s: political manipulation, interdependencies and relationships, ideological tendencies and, last but not least, the language of the narrative cinema. One could even say that the analysis of the structure of the film and the process of its reception had as its main goal the unmasking of the mechanisms that were used to manipulate the viewer. By producing 'minimal', analytical and highly economical films, the artists associated with the Workshop defined an alternative to the baroque, ideological, commercial and narrative-literary productions of the official film studios. This type of work was not unique to Poland; it was also widespread in other East European countries. For instance, in Romania, it was practised by Ion Grigorescu, in Yugoslavia by such artists as Tomislav Gotovac and Goran Trbuljak, and in Hungary by Miklós Erdély and Dóra Maurer.

The situation facing culture in Yugoslavia, due to the country's geo-political location, was unique in Eastern Europe. Yugoslavia was quite literally located

'between' the East and the West. As a result, it always oscillated between different centres of international power because of such geo-historic factors. After World War II, Yugoslavia retained its 'in between' location and status.<sup>150</sup> However, it would be a mistake to assume, that its independence from the USSR produced a liberal or democratic system of power. Although the Yugoslav political regime used less draconian measures than the regimes of the GDR or Romania, nevertheless it tolerated no political opposition. The beginnings of such opposition within the Yugoslav intellectual circles, which had either a dissident or nationalist character, were systematically suppressed by the authorities under Marshal Tito. Also, the relative stability of the Yugoslav economy, the availability of consumer goods (inaccessible in the other countries of Eastern Europe) and the possibility of unencumbered travel abroad for economic, intellectual or tourist reasons, did not create a climate favourable to a widespread criticism of the regime, with the exception of national issues kept under tight control by the authorities. As we have seen, a very different economic situation forced in Poland a certain degree of political liberalization, if not de facto tolerance for illegal but quite open opposition. In Yugoslavia, such organized groups as KOR could not exist. But despite those differences, one can speak of certain analogies within the cultural sphere between Poland, a member of the Warsaw Pact fully subordinated to the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia, a country independent of the military and political pressures from Big Brother. Those analogies were particularly apparent in comparison with the other countries of the region in the 1970s. In both Poland and Yugoslavia one could observe the processes described by Havel, namely the coming together of the structures of the post-totalitarian society with the consumerist value system that created models of conformist behaviour. Both countries had an active art scene and evinced general interest in neo-avant-garde art, including conceptual art. In both countries a significant number of alternative exhibition venues, cultural centres and galleries, often connected with student groups, were being created. I described earlier some of the Polish examples of this phenomenon. In the Yugoslav context, student centres played a particularly significant role. Two such key centres were the gallery affiliated with the Zagreb Student Centre and the Student Cultural Centre at Belgrade University.<sup>151</sup> Student centres in other towns also played a significant role. One should also mention here the Galerie des Locataires (Zagreb-Paris) created by Ida Biard, which functioned as a completely alternative quasi-institution dedicated to exhibition and promotion of art functioning entirely outside the commercial sphere.<sup>152</sup>

However, the art scene focused on 'new art' was not limited to such institutions. A significant number of professional venues, such as museums

of modern and contemporary art (mainly in Belgrade, Ljubljana and Zagreb), institutions that had no equivalent in the other countries of the region, participated in it and in some instances even actively promoted this type of work.<sup>153</sup> Both countries were rather open to contacts with the West, the influence of the Western neo-avant-garde and the exchange of information. In Yugoslavia this openness was much broader. It resulted in an unprecedented internationalization of the local art scene, frequent visits by Western artists and the presence of the Yugoslav ones on the international (Western) art scene.<sup>154</sup> In Yugoslavia and in Poland, the state largely abandoned restrictive cultural policies during this period and oversaw the development of contemporary art from a generally neutral position. One could even say that it drew benefits from its cultural tolerance. The ‘Occidentalization’ of local art created a much more ‘friendly’ image of the country for Western investors and politicians. By comparison, in Hungary, a country where the socialist consumer culture had a much more solid economic and institutional foundation than in Poland, the cultural situation during the 1970s was not nearly as open. That opening would take place only in the 1980s, the last decade of Communist rule in Europe.

By listing these similarities between Yugoslavia and Poland, I do not intend to obscure the significant differences that existed between the two countries. Those differences, which resulted from the disparities in the degree of openness and the levels of economic development, had a marked impact on cultural developments. Quite simply, the much wealthier Yugoslavia could afford to invest significant sums of their much ‘stronger’ currency into culture. There are also other, much deeper differences, related to the internal function of the local art scenes and the local understanding of art. In particular, this is related to a widespread interest among the Yugoslav artists in forming art groups, something that could not be observed in Poland. While Yugoslav artists tended to form collectives, their Polish counterparts tended to either work individually or to join informal groups affiliated with particular institutions, such as galleries. A cursory glance at the list of groups active in Yugoslavia suffices to give some sense of the scale of this phenomenon.<sup>155</sup> During the 1950s two very influential groups were formed in Zagreb: EXAT ’51 at the beginning of the decade, and Gorgona towards its end. The group OHO functioned in Ljubljana during the 1960s and into the early 1970s. The Group of the Six continued the avant-garde tradition in Zagreb, one of the most interesting Balkan art centres. It was followed by the Active Artist’s Collective, and a mysteriously named group, the Retired Person Tihomir Simčić, created by the leading Zagreb artists Braco Dimitrijević and Goran Trbuljak. The group’s name came from the name of an accidental person who, by opening

the door of a building, inadvertently made an impression of the doorknob in a prepared mould, thereby creating a work of art that was later signed with his name. In 1969, Slavko Matković formed the group Bosch+Bosch in Subotica. In 1970, the Group *KOD* (renamed *3*, then *3 KOD*) was founded in Novi Sad. Finally, Belgrade became home base for Team A<sup>3</sup>, Verbumprogram, Group 143, and an *Art informel* collective of several Belgrade-based artists who met as students at the local Academy of Fine Arts and later became affiliated with the gallery at the Student Cultural Centre: Marina Abramović, Slobodan Milivojević, Neša Paripović, Zoran Popović, Raša Todosijević and Gergelij Urkom. Although it would be difficult to argue with Jandranka Vinterhalter's observation that formation of groups constitutes a defining characteristic of Modernism,<sup>156</sup> the scale of this phenomenon in Yugoslavia is remarkable and highly unusual, especially when one considers that in the context of the neo-avant-garde (in contrast to the classical avant-garde) there is a general decrease of interest in the forming of art groups.

There is another important difference. Even though both countries had a well-developed system of state patronage and social welfare support for the artists, paradoxically in Poland museums had much greater freedom in making purchasing decisions and were generally much more independent of the centralized decision-making bodies. In Yugoslavia the centralized Purchasing Commission, closely affiliated with the official artists' union, made all decisions concerning museum purchases of works. The museums could only make decisions concerning the purchase of the so-called rejects, that is, those works the central Commission did not purchase.<sup>157</sup> In practice, the institutions tended to distribute purchases more or less evenly among the union's members. In Poland, despite the existence of centralized structures, the museums were much more independent and, in practice, tended to make their own decisions.<sup>158</sup>

However, the most significant difference between Yugoslavia and Poland was the difference in the relationship between the neo-avant-garde and Modernism. While in Poland the neo-avant-garde (post-Modernism) inscribed itself into the Modernist value system, providing a historic continuity in its development since the 'thaw' of the mid-1950s, in Yugoslavia the neo-avant-garde developed in clear opposition to Modernism, which had acquired the status of official art in the preceding decades. Although the neo-avant-garde artistic innovations were not necessarily critical in a political sense, they clearly represented an alternative to the values and the status of Modernism.<sup>159</sup> The statement made by Želimir Koščević, one of the leading Croatian art critics, who served as the director of the gallery at the Zagreb Student Centre, is highly symptomatic of this attitude. Describing the artists who participated in the 1967 show 'Hit Parade' organized at the gallery, Koščević wrote, 'they belong

to a generation that was able to cut through the stale frontline of the lyrical abstraction, *Art informel*, *art-brut* and Surrealism, [or] artistic possibilities and paths, which at a certain moment played an important role, but which with time . . . turned into conservative forces that stood in the way of new and fresh ideas'.<sup>160</sup> Such opposition was rarely articulated in Poland. Instead, there was a tendency to see a certain continuity between the post-thaw *Art informel* and neo-avant-garde practice. Ješa Denegri observed that the tensions apparent within the Yugoslav art scene had not only a political, but also a generational as well as a socio-professional dimension, since the younger artists often did not receive professional art school training, but rather a university-based humanist one.<sup>161</sup>

Throughout Eastern Europe the neo-avant-garde participated in the decentralization of culture. This process is particularly significant in Yugoslavia due to the country's character as a federation as well as the distinct art-historic tradition of the different republics and cities. Davor Matičević wrote that before World War II, Belgrade was dominated by Surrealist tendencies, Ljubljana by Expressionist, and Zagreb by Constructivist styles.<sup>162</sup> This view of the situation was confirmed by Ješa Denegri, who also observed that those tendencies were continued to a certain extent during the post-war period: Zagreb became the centre of neo-Constructivism (EXAT '51 and New Tendencies) and neo-avant-garde (Gorgona), whereas Belgrade tended to maintain the traditions of *Art informel* and other similar tendencies with a stronger Parisian provenance.<sup>163</sup> However, the art geography of Yugoslavia was not limited to Zagreb and Belgrade. It also included Ljubljana, a key art centre and the home of OHO.<sup>164</sup> One should also mention the role of other cities such as Novi Sad, Subotica and, to a lesser extent, Split, which had active art scenes and which produced ideas and initiatives that impacted other art centres.<sup>165</sup> For instance, in 1972 two important publications dedicated to conceptual art (a special issue of the journal *Polja* 156: 'Konceptualna umetnost', February 1972) and body art (*Artist's Body as an Object and Subject of Art*) appeared in Novi Sad.<sup>166</sup> But, it is also certain that the Zagreb-Belgrade axis was key to Yugoslav culture of the 1970s.<sup>167</sup>

The Zagreb post-war artistic tradition created by EXAT '51, and later New Tendencies, the Biennale of Neo-Constructivism, and especially the activities of Gorgona (1959–66) forms the immediate background of the 1970s neo-avant-garde.<sup>168</sup> The main problem explored by Gorgona was the critique of Modernist painting. Marijan Susovski observed that the next generation of artists explored fundamentally ethical problems concerning the status of art-making in a situation when the traditional framing of art and culture was being questioned.<sup>169</sup> The first clear manifestation of the Croatian neo-avant-garde

was the aforementioned *Hit Parade* (1967), organized at the recently founded gallery affiliated with the Zagreb Student Centre. The exhibition consisted of a series of spontaneous events and was the first in a series of exhibitions and art happenings that would take place in Croatia's capital. One of those was a unique 'exhibition' of mail-art organized by Koščević in 1972 in his gallery Mail-Items. It was unique because it did not follow the conventions of such presentations. Koščević exhibited a closed crate containing works sent back from Paris, where they were previously exhibited at a local Biennale. The works themselves were not accessible; the public could only view the crate that contained them. The works were never 'revealed', only the evidence of their transit. A couple of years earlier, the gallery at the Student Centre had organized *Total Event* (1970), during which Boris Buća and Dawbor Tomčić announced 'The Decree on Democratization of Art', which stated:

- 1) The following are hereby abolished: painting, sculpture, graphic art, applied arts, industrial design, architecture and urban planning.
- 2) A ban is hereby placed on the following: all activity in the history of art and especially the so-called art criticism.
- 3) There shall be no exhibitions in galleries, museums or art pavilions.<sup>170</sup>

This radical declaration was not far from reality. Such attitudes and attempts at practice that questioned the traditional organization of artistic life in various ways pervaded the dynamic Croatian art scene. For instance, Mladen Stilinović, a member of the Group of the Six formed in the mid-1970s, instead of creating traditional art objects, produced book-objects. The entire group often organized events that took place outside the exhibition territory in the real space of the city. That space also was the setting of Tomislav Gotovac's performances, in which the artist used his own body. Josip Stojaić, on the other hand, moved in the direction of a radical linguistic deconstruction of the work. The Croatian artists also developed video art and often engaged in a critique of the television image (Goran Trbuljak, Dalibor Martinis), as well as representation of women (Sanja Iveković). But perhaps the most spectacular and characteristic works of the Croatian neo-avant-garde were those produced by Braco Dimitrijević.

In the late 1960s and early '70s, Dimitrijević began producing pieces that questioned the status of the artwork and of the institutions that defined it in a radical way. I mentioned earlier Tihomir Simčić, a retired man who in 1969 became the author of an artwork, and therefore an artist. When he opened a door, the doorknob on the other side made an impression in a mould prepared earlier by Dimitrijević. The same year, Kresimir Klika became an artist under similar circumstances. He was asked by Dimitrijević to sign the 'work'

created when a car drove over an empty milk carton.<sup>171</sup> Such works certainly contained a radical, if ironic, critique of Modernism and of the Modernist value system: the problem of ‘exceptionalism’ and the genius of an individual artist, gifted with particular talents, the necessity of personally creating the work, and of its institutional (gallery or museum), material (painted canvas) and aesthetic dimension. That last aspect was rendered absurd when the artist produced a ‘form’ by spilling milk on the street and thereby created a stain that made a reference to the popular linguistic formula used to describe *Art informel*, namely tachism (from the French term *tache*, or stain). Those actions were the beginnings of a multi-year project *The Casual Passer-by I met at . . .* (here the artist would insert the information on the location and time of the meeting) (illus. 150). Dimitrijević would ask pedestrians in different cities if he could take their picture. If they agreed, the photograph would be enlarged and exhibited on a facade of a building located on a busy street. Frequently the photographed person would be invited to attend a ‘celebration’ dedicated to the work, which included a dinner, toasts, commemorative photographs and so on. Sometimes the artist would create and dedicate memorials, statues and commemorative plaques, normally reserved for significant historic figures, to random pedestrians. The ‘longevity’ of this work is aptly demonstrated by the following anecdote. In 1989, Dimitrijević was asked to create a project for the great Parisian exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*. The artist asked a passer-by on a Parisian street if he could take his photograph and exhibit the enlarged photo on a facade of a building. The man responded in annoyance: ‘It is not very original what you do, Dimitrijević did it twenty years ago’ and walked away.<sup>172</sup> Though this anecdote may demonstrate a high level of knowledge among Parisians about contemporary art, it is also a testimony to the permanence of the problematic explored by the artist and his stubborn insistence on continuing the work.

Dimitrijević’s work deals with complex issues despite the seeming technical simplicity of the execution. Dan Cameron observed that the artist reversed (and therefore questioned) the art-historic tradition of the relationship between the portrait subject and the portrait maker.<sup>173</sup> In general, the artist was the producer of the portrait. The more or less wealthy, the more or less noteworthy individual who wished to be ‘immortalized’ commissioned his or her likeness from a more or less significant artist, according to his or her financial means and social position. By contrast, in Dimitrijević’s work the artist selects his subject, and does so virtually by chance. The depicted person is an individual who would not expect such a ‘service’. Moreover, Cameron writes that sometimes Dimitrijević would ask significant and well known artists (Richard Hamilton, Douglas Huebler) to participate in the project as his

150. Braco Dimitrijević, *The Casual Passer-by I met at... (Paris, 1971)*. Musée National d'Art Modern – Centre Georges Pompidou.



portrait subjects, a fact that further ‘complicated’ the issue.<sup>174</sup> It is also noteworthy that these works were never exhibited in museums or art venues, but on the streets. This was their original context and their ‘natural’ exhibition site. By insisting on ‘unmediated’ contact with the viewer, the artist thereby subjected the role of the art institutions to a critique. Catherine Millet also observed that the exhibited large-scale photographs recalled a certain exhibition convention commonly used at the time throughout Eastern Europe, namely the practice of placing enlarged portraits of the leaders of the Communist party in prominent urban locations.<sup>175</sup> Such portraits were particularly common in Yugoslavia, a country with a strong cult of the leader, Marshal Tito. Therefore the work also had a potentially political significance, since it inscribed ordinary people into portrait conventions normally reserved for the leaders or dictators.

In the second half of the 1970s Dimitrijević began to work according to a method which he described in his 1976 book *Tractatus Post Historicus*. He appropriated into the domain of his projects authentic, museum artworks of considerable art-historic significance. The artist produced a series of works consisting of three elements: an authentic work of art by a well known historic artist (including the history of Modernism); mass-produced objects received as a gift from a particular person; and natural objects (vegetable, fruit) (illus. 151, 152). History, in this case art history, was stripped of its privileged status, even though the exhibition took place in a museum. The recognized work of art, kept secure by the guards and insurance certificates, was treated without 'due' respect. It was displayed in a manner that went against the established museum practices, posed crooked, as if were left behind, accompanied by a bicycle, a pitch-fork, a walking cane and a phone, as well as apples, melons or other types of fruit. Most importantly, the masterpiece was reused, deprived of



151. Braco  
Dimitrijević,  
*Triptychos Post  
Historicus*,  
1976. National-  
galerie Berlin.

152. Braco Dimitrijević,  
*Triptychos Post Historicus*,  
1985. Wilhelm Hack-Museum,  
Ludwigshafen.



its individual status, a fact that countered the museum-based cult of art. Lóránd Hegyi writes that in this work, the history itself was stripped of its aura, used for a particular purpose, dethroned, de-heroized. The art historian further noted the significance of the fact that the history was subjected to this treatment by an artist working in East Europe, a region where the mystification and ideological perception of history was given a special status by one, however, who does not see himself as the region's 'ambassador'.<sup>176</sup>

The artist's work on history was truly pioneering and found significant resonance in the 1980s, when history became the subject of various deconstructive postmodern discourses. However, when Dimitrijević's two series of works are considered together, using as a reference point his motto: 'Louvre is my studio, street is my museum', it becomes apparent that the artist was able to radically re-evaluate the mechanisms controlling the function of the artistic culture and to provide an analysis of the status of art institutions, thereby provoking the questioning of the meaning and the status of the work in the post-art-historic era. He also suggested that after such analysis conducted by the neo-avant-garde art, the return to a historic work, to the 'innocence' of the work of art and art institutions, was impossible.

Returning to the problem of the Yugoslav art geography, it must be noted that one should not overemphasize the tensions between Zagreb and Belgrade

during the 1970s. Croatian artists often exhibited in Belgrade and vice versa. National identity was not as important at that time, in particular within the neo-avant-garde circles, as it became later. For instance, Dimitrijević came from Sarajevo, from a cosmopolitan family of artists (his father was connected for many years with the Parisian art scene), and had earned his reputation on the international arena. In general, during this period, one can only speak of Yugoslav art as a whole, rather than the art of the individual republics. After the breakup of the country in the 1990s, the local differences between different regions tended to be exaggerated. While the aforementioned tensions must be considered, one should do so while keeping in mind that those tensions existed between historic artistic traditions rather than national groups. Nevertheless, in a map of the 1970s East European neo-avant-garde one must acknowledge the unique identity and character of Belgrade, defined by the artists who worked there and by the problems they engaged.

Jasna Tijardović wrote that the beginnings of the Belgrade neo-avant-garde are connected with the opening in 1971 of the gallery at the Student Cultural Centre, directed by Dunja Blažević.<sup>177</sup> During this period a group of artists, among them Marina Abramović, Neša Paripović, Zoran Popović, Raša Todosijević and Gergelij Urkom, organized an exhibition, *Objects and Projects*. It was the first show in a series of annual exhibitions entitled *October*, organized by the same group. Ješa Denegri saw in this and other initiatives a theme connected with a broadly interpreted notion of the ‘politicization’ of the art scene, understood in terms of a certain sensitivity to social issues. The other element identified by the Yugoslav critic was the emphasis on the artist’s ego within the 1970s art practised in Belgrade.<sup>178</sup> Denegri listed several examples of both tendencies. He pointed to the work of Raša Todosijević as an example of the intensification of the interest in identity, and self-identification in art. The artists produced in the early 1970s a postcard in which his photographic self-portrait was inscribed across the chest with the word ‘YES’. This should also be the context for considering the artist’s projects in which his decisions to engage in a particular action provided the basic definition of the work, as in *Water Drinking* (1973–4), a work that consisted of the artist drinking water in various situations. Another Belgrade-based artist, Slavko Matković, published in 1974 a declaration – ‘I am an artist’ – in the *Hamburger Zeitung*. Denegri also mentions Marina Abramović’s performances, and projects by Radomir Damnjanović-Damnjan.<sup>179</sup> Damnjanović-Damnjan’s works are particularly interesting because they combine the two tendencies characteristic of the Belgrade neo-avant-garde circles identified by Denegri. After a return from the United States and a stay in the USSR in 1973, the artist produced a series of works entitled *In Honour of the Soviet Avant-Garde* (illus. 153), in which he

photographed his face with a name of a famous Russian avant-garde artist inscribed on his forehead. The work referred to the famous poster designed by El Lissitzky for the Russian exhibition at Zurich in 1929, in which the foreheads of a pair of young people advertising the homeland of the proletariat were inscribed with the word 'ussr'. According to Denegri, Damnjanović-Damnjan not only paid homage to the Soviet avant-garde, but also spotlighted its fate, namely its brutal suppression by the Soviet regime.<sup>180</sup> The artists also worked in a broader political perspective. In 1975 he published in Graz a text that argued for the necessity of freedom, while discussing the limits on individual freedom imposed by the society functioning as a 'prison without the guards'.<sup>181</sup>

The political aspect of the Yugoslav neo-avant-garde art discussed by Denegri is particularly interesting in view of the fact that, with the exception of the Hungarian art scene, the East European artists were in general not particularly interested in this issue. In Yugoslavia, however, the problem of politics acquired a much broader understanding and was often combined with the questions concerning the status of an individual. For instance, Balint Szombaty's 1972 project *Lenin in Budapest* was incorporated into the official 1 May parade. The photograph of Lenin created in this context a real tension between the individual's private behaviour, his own decision, and the public gathering manipulated by the authorities.<sup>182</sup> Raša Todosijević produced a series of performances under a collective title *Vive la France – Vive la Tyrannie*, which he performed during his trip to Holland in 1979. In those performances, the popular slogan of the French revolution, 'vive la France – vive la liberté', is given the opposite meaning of the one intended. The artists accompanied the pronunciation of the slogan by hitting with emphasis and force in turn a

153. Radomir Damnjanović-Damnjan,  
*In Honour of the Soviet Avant-Garde*,  
1973,  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb.



hard metal plate and a soft slab of clay. The artists intended thereby to demystify the ideology of ‘progress’ and art’s seeming engagement with this form of ideology.<sup>183</sup>

The art geography of the 1970s neo-avant-garde reveals the existence of significant diversity across the region as well as within particular countries. Those tensions and dynamics were likely not very apparent at the time when Klaus Groh wrote his pioneering book. We see them now with the aid of historic distance. Although the works published on the subject have since made significant contributions, they have tended to focus on the situation within the individual countries and suffer from the lack of a broadly comparative perspective, except for comparisons made within various tendencies in the context of exhibitions such as *Osteuropa Mail-Art*, organized in Schwerin in 1996, or *Body and the East*, held in Ljubljana in 1998. Sometimes broader exhibitions, such as *Out of Action*, organized in Los Angeles in 1998, or *Global Conceptualism* in New York in 1999, provoked such comparisons and prompted one to draw a map of the East European neo-avant-garde. However, irrespective of the current assessment of Groh’s pioneering work, made with the benefit of a historic hindsight, his book *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa*, published almost 30 years ago and for a long period the only text of its kind, must be seen as an important source of all such efforts.

# 8

## Conceptual Art between Theory of Art and Critique of the System

East European conceptual art, situated at the core of the neo-avant-garde practice, has not been particularly well understood in the West. Its development, specific context, meanings, artists and works have been largely ignored by Western art history. Examples of this work were generally missing from important catalogues and anthologies on conceptual art produced at the heyday of the movement as well as from subsequent historic studies aspiring to provide a systematic description of conceptualism as an art movement. More recently, an important anthology of primary texts edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson on the most extensive projects of its kind to date, did not include a single text by an East European conceptual artist.<sup>1</sup> Much the same can be said with regards to recent critical and historic studies, especially those aiming to provide a more or less comprehensive survey of the phenomenon. For instance, Benjamin Buchloh's article 'Conceptual Art, 1962–1969', published in 1990 in *October*, did not contain a single reference to the works produced in the region.<sup>2</sup> However, here and there, there are some indications that those attitudes are beginning to shift. For instance, Tony Godfrey's book *Conceptual Art* (1998), written for a more general audience, did, to a limited extent, venture into the territory of Eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the anthology *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (1999), edited by Michael Newman and Jon Bird, did contain one article on the conceptual art of Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> Although its author, Desa Philippi, could be criticized for her perhaps too 'journalistic' and impressionistic treatment of the subject, her efforts to capture the art-historic processes largely invisible in the West must nevertheless be applauded. In this respect, the exhibition and accompanying catalogue *Global Conceptualism*, organized by the Queens Museum of Art (New York, 1999), constituted a significant departure from the norm. It included a significant section on East-

Central European art curated by László Beke and a separate one on Russian art curated by Margarita Tupitsyn.<sup>5</sup>

Conceptual art, which can be seen as the essence of the East European neo-avant-garde, was extremely popular because it solved a number of problems facing culture under Communist rule. Although conceptual art appeared relatively early in Eastern Europe and could be seen in the works of the Croatian artists associated with Gorgona, especially Dimitrje Bašićević [Mangelos], at that early date it functioned largely as an analogue to Western conceptualism. László Beke has noted, however, that if conceptual art had not developed in the West, it certainly would have been invented in Eastern Europe. Beke argues that conceptualism gave the East European artists an opportunity to produce works that avoided the intervention of the authorities.<sup>6</sup> Simply put, conceptual art, like mail-art, gave artists significant latitude in the creative process and in interpretation of the work of art in terms of its theoretical, economic and political function. Technically undemanding, conceptual art gave almost everyone a chance to be an artist. It was cheap and relatively safe. Anyone could write statements that informed the reader ‘this is art’ and ‘exhibit’ them at various locations. Under the conditions of chronic deficit of resources and materials, the works of art could be made and shown with minimal resources. Moreover, it allowed various non-standard forms of presentation: through the mail; in inexpensive, ‘improvised’ exhibitions; or in primitive, photocopied ‘publications’. Also, because it was so ephemeral, conceptual art easily escaped the control of the political censors, though this did not necessarily mean that the authorities ignored it.

In those countries, such Poland or Yugoslavia, where censorship of art was weak or non-existent (with respect to the form of art, not its political content, which was always carefully monitored and suppressed by the censorship system), one could speak of a general shift towards conceptualism seen in terms of a complete freedom of expression, but also towards devaluation of the traditional art values. The Polish art critic Andrzej Turowski observed that lasting value cannot be produced by a hundred ideas with which one informs oneself or others about the world, but rather resides in the ability to reject the ninety-nine that have little merit.<sup>7</sup> In mid-1970s, Wiesław Borowski, one of the founders of the Warsaw Foksal Gallery, wrote an article expressing similar views. In it he indicted the so-called pseudo-avant-garde and the superficial, mass production of conceptual art. Not surprisingly, many of the artists who created a ‘hundred-plus works a day’ vehemently protested Borowski’s assessment of the situation.<sup>8</sup> Irrespective of the examples chosen by the author (which were, admittedly, not always judiciously selected), it is certain that the far-reaching freedom engendered by conceptualism brought

with it the danger of devaluation of values and lowering of artistic standards.<sup>9</sup>

However, in those countries, such as Czechoslovakia or Hungary, where conceptualism was not as ‘safe’ and where all ‘unofficial’ forms of cultural production were either prohibited or poorly tolerated by the authorities, the massive intellectual impoverishment of art practice that accompanied the economic poverty had a much less extensive character.

This phenomenon was also connected with the different degrees to which conceptual art was institutionalized in the different countries of the region. In Poland and Yugoslavia during the 1970s conceptual practice was supported not only by alternative venues (in and of itself the fact that such alternative spaces existed in Communist countries is remarkably telling), but also by museums and national collections of modern art. In other countries of the region, such as Czechoslovakia and Hungary, not to mention the GDR and Romania, conceptual art had to function on the margins of the official culture or entirely outside of it. It did not create any opportunities for professional advancement besides those involving one’s ‘career’ as a dissident. Those factors had a major impact on the character and scale of the phenomenon of conceptualism in different countries. The most visible aspect of that difference was the almost complete lack of directly political statements in Polish conceptual art and their strong presence in Hungarian conceptualism.

Independently of local traditions of conceptualism, visible not only in Yugoslavia but also in the other countries, one of the most important factors that provided an impetus for a dynamic development of conceptualism throughout the region was the fact that conceptual practice could easily attain an international dimension. All the countries in Eastern Europe, irrespective of their actual degree of openness to the West, suffered from the isolation imposed by the existence of the Iron Curtain. The artists from the region were highly sensitive on that point. Conceptual art allowed for easy participation in international exchange: works could be easily mailed, taken abroad in luggage, or simply created ‘on the spot’. They could also easily be made to be ‘cosmopolitan’. East European artists tended to use English in their conceptual projects, even those executed on the local or regional level. All this gave the conceptual artists an illusion that they were, in fact, participating in the production of the universal culture, and that East European art had returned to the international (Western) art fold. Seen in this context, one could say that conceptual art was a symptom of the new East European universalism – new because the ‘old’ universalism was created by Modernist art, *Art informel* painting and neo-Constructivism. Although this new, neo-avant-garde form of artistic universalism may have been easier than the old because it was cheaper to maintain, it was equally illusory. The earlier cited Western studies on

conceptual art clearly demonstrate that the impact and function of East European conceptualism remained largely confined to the region and sometimes even to a particular country.

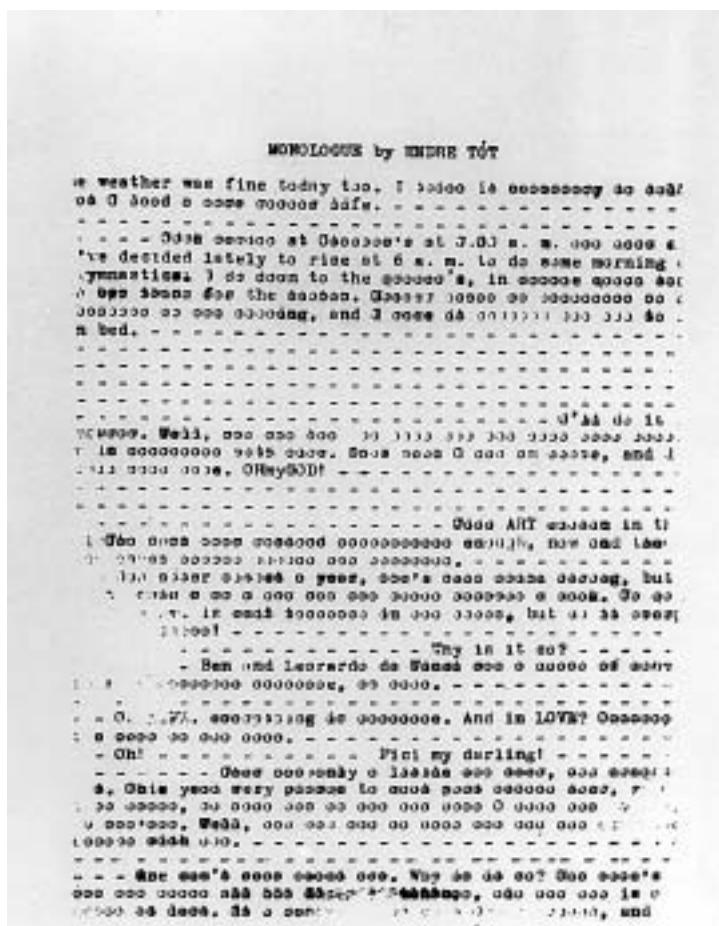
There is a general consensus that East European conceptual art tended to be much more heterogeneous than its Western counterpart. In fact, one could apply this observation to the entire neo-avant-garde, or avant-garde, and explain it as a consequence of the specific character of the margin, a location where it is much easier to change locations and achieve heterogeneity (or eclecticism) than in the centre, which is committed to doctrinal purity. Such observations are not without merit. Éva Körner has noted that because East European conceptual art was closely allied with other neo-avant-garde forms, it rarely took on the 'classic' form of Western conceptual art.<sup>10</sup> As accurate as that observation may be, it is too easy to overemphasize this phenomenon. As we will see, in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Poland, it is relatively easy to find numerous examples of the 'classic' form of conceptual art based in tautological self-analysis of the art language. Even in Hungary, the country most closely surveyed by Körner, conceptual art based on an analysis of the structure of art language, tautological construction of statements, analysis of the media, or, more generally, the self-referential character of the work was not that uncommon. Körner herself cites the example of Miklós Erdély, or rather of some of his works (his entire oeuvre is highly variable and reflects the changes and shifts in the history of modern art, a fact noted by author). She



154 György Jovánovics, Liza Wiathruck: *Holos Graphos*, 1976.

writes that although the artist was educated as an architect, wrote poetry, made films, created performances and rejected the purism of conceptualism in the 1980s, he was 'the closest to being a conceptual artist *par excellence* in Hungary'.<sup>11</sup> Of course, this is also a rhetorical exaggeration. One could bring up Dóra Maurer, another Hungarian artist mentioned by Körner in the context of her discussion of the 1970s avant-garde film. Here also, as with the majority of the Hungarian artists, it is impossible to speak about Maurer's work in terms of stylistic uniformity. For instance, she is well known for her neo-Constructivist works. However, her films as well as her photo-based works clearly (even more so than Erdély's) reference an analytic approach to her work and the logical structure supplied by tautology.

During the 1970s a number of other Hungarian artists produced similar projects.<sup>12</sup> For instance, some of György Jovánovics's works from that period,



155. Endre Tót,  
Monologue,  
1971-2.

156. Endre Tót,  
*I'm glad if I  
can hold this  
in my hand*,  
Genf 1976.



in particular his series *Liza Wiathruck: Holos Graphos* (illus. 154), could be seen as examples of the 'classic' formula of conceptual art. Yet if one can speak at all of the 'classic' doctrine of conceptualism in the Hungarian context, one must consider the work of Endre Tót. The artist clearly engaged in a tautological construction of statements in a number of projects, such as the series *Zero Art*, in which the act of writing 'zeros' became the basis of all communication (for instance, a letter written entirely in 'zeros', a poster or a banner bearing only 'zeros', and so on) (illus. 155). Similarly, in the cycle *I'm glad if I . . .*, Tót described activities in which he currently engaged and which gave him pleasure: demonstrating in the street, stamping, hanging up posters, writing and so on (illus. 156). In a series of works with 'rain', he covered an image (a photograph or a reproduction of a work of art) with diagonal lines imitating rain. He differentiated those works through titles: 'my rain', 'your rain', 'left rain – right rain' and so on. In other pieces, he simply provided information about his current activity, without giving any reason for the activity, as in *I'm doing nothing* (1980).<sup>13</sup> What is particularly interesting in Tót's work are the political references, as in the work in which the artist's portrait is juxtaposed with that of Lenin and annotated with the text 'you are the one who made me glad' (1975) or in the photograph which shows the smiling artist reading the Moscow *Pravda*, the symbol of the Communist propaganda, annotated with the text 'I am glad if I can read a newspaper'. Tót's smiling face can be seen through a large hole cut in the centre of the newspaper (illus. 157).

An approach to the problem of the relationship between Western and East European conceptual art that emphasized the heterogeneous character of the latter (and therefore posits the normative homogeneity of the former) is also based on a radically simplified perception of Western European conceptualism. It is a perception that ignores the diversity of conceptual practice and identifies it exclusively with the orthodox work of the Art and Language movement, or ideas articulated by Joseph Kosuth and Sol LeWitt. Certainly, one cannot contain the range of approaches present in Western conceptual art within such a narrow doctrinal frame. Similarly, one should not assume that such 'doctrinal' statements were entirely missing from conceptual art produced in Eastern Europe.

Those reductive approaches and surface descriptions cannot get at the heart of the matter since the problem of East European conceptualism has much deeper roots. It is implicated in the artists' desperate resolve at times to participate in the international movement and to break out of the isolation imposed on the region by the Communist regimes. Moreover, it is also con-



157. Endre Tót,  
*I am glad if  
I can read  
newspaper,*  
1973–5.

nected with the artists' and intellectuals' more or less conscious attempts to defend art against externally imposed political instrumentalization. With regards to the first issue, one must keep in mind that while Western conceptual art (and more broadly the neo-avant-garde) grew out of the critique of painting, including Modernist painting, in Eastern Europe (with the exception of Yugoslavia) conceptual art did not have such a context. There was a general belief in continuity of modern art and in a smooth, evolutionary transition from *Art informel* to conceptualism. For example, in 1970 Polish artist Zdzisław Jurkiewicz derived his neo-avant-garde works in a clearly self-conscious way from Modernist painting practice, including action painting.<sup>14</sup> In Hungary a similar evolution can be traced through the careers of several artists. After experimenting with neo-constructivist painting, Imre Bak began to work in a conceptual mode and later, in the 1980s, flirted with neo-Expressionism. László Lakner, coming from the direction of Pop art, took up conceptualism in the early 1970s and later worked in quasi-neo-Expressionist manner. Endre Tót's career traces a similar trajectory. The artist began with *Art informel*, later created virtually 'classic' conceptual works, and in the 1980s and '90s returned to painting, but unlike his colleagues produced works that retained a strong link to the analytic and conceptual tradition.

It is important to keep in mind that the overwhelming majority of the East European neo-avant-garde artists, including those who produced conceptual art, continued to work within the Modernist value system, grounded in the idea of the autonomy of art and its disengagement from Socialist Realism and detachment from politics (with the exception of several Hungarian artists). While those values, inherited from 1940s and '50s Modernism, may have come into conflict with the neo-avant-garde practice in the United States, in Eastern Europe they simply evolved to accommodate new forms of expression. The attachment to the notion of art's autonomy could be seen in this context as a form of a phobia brought on by the trauma of Socialist Realism. The starkly negative experience of this type of Communist indoctrination during the early 1950s had a profound and lasting impact on politically engaged art practice, always viewed with suspicion as a potential source of the propagandistic instrumentalization of art. The idea of the 'freedom' of art was commonly identified with its apolitical character and disengagement, not political or social engagement. It must be also noted that the form of political indifference apparent in conceptual art was very convenient for the Communist authorities.

Andrzej Turowski observed that, in general, the problem of the value of conceptual art involves consideration of the relationship between its theoretical and critical dimensions.<sup>15</sup> The theoretical dimension of conceptual art was often fairly uncomplicated and is frequently exclusively identified with the issue

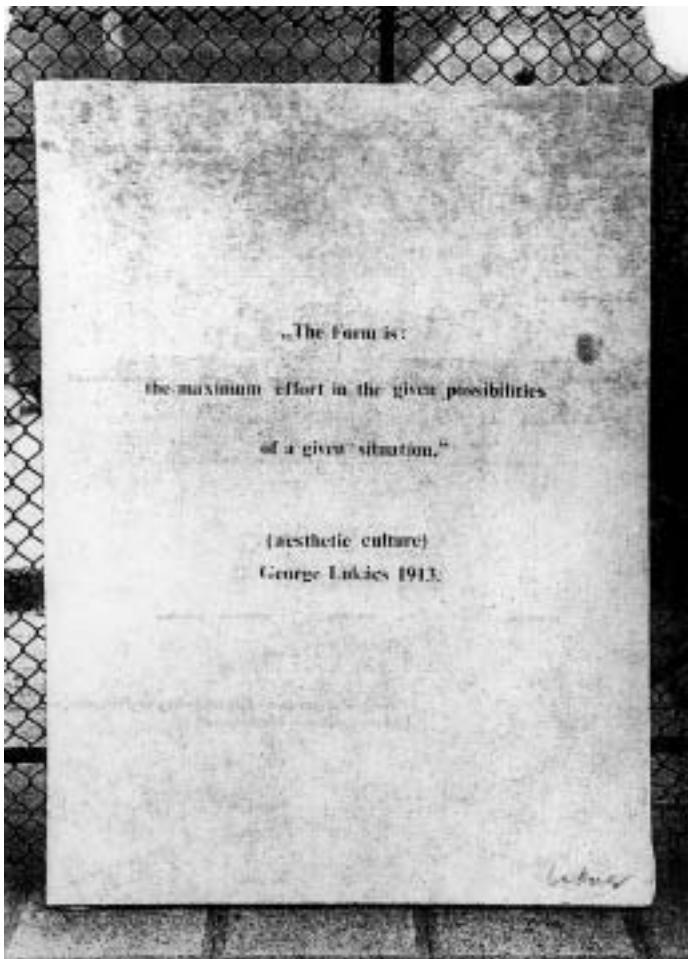
of art's dematerialization. The sheer volume of projects allowed idea art to flourish without forcing it to address the issue of its contribution as understood in term of its critical relationship to reality. Although this has always been a problem for art, in Eastern Europe this issue emerged under specific historic circumstances. Nevertheless, one can reconstruct a critical dimension of conceptual art by focusing on the specific point of reference of the East European artists: the critique of power. This aspect of conceptualism was particularly apparent in the 1970s in Hungary.

I mentioned the political character of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde in the preceding chapters, when discussing the art of Sándor Pinczehelyi and Tamás Szentjóby. In this chapter I would like to focus on examples closer to the 'classic' formulation of conceptual art, grounded in the models derived from its linguistic, tautological analysis of the structures embedded in a particular system of statements. It is also appropriate at this point to address the key question of whether, in addition to works with a clearly political subtext, the purification of an artistic statement, seen for instance in the works of Endre Tót, has a critical significance? Did Tót's art, consisting of writing of 'zeros' in texts, on banners or walls, have political references? It certainly functioned as an antidote to the 'chatter' of the official discourse in the Communist countries. Its economy of means was the opposite of the avalanche of words with no reference to any reality (often substituting for the real) of the ideological propaganda which functioned as a discursive frame for the state policies. This Communist chatter was essentially devoid of meaning, had no semantic value and no contents. Could Tót's art be seen under those circumstances as a metaphor for the characteristic emptiness of communication in a Communist state?

One could ask similar questions in reference to more refined and poetic projects, such as those produced by László Lakner.<sup>16</sup> In the early 1970s Lakner produced 'classic' conceptual works and, simultaneously, works with a political subtext. For instance, in 1971 he created *Crumpled Poem*, consisting of a crumpled piece of paper on which the artist wrote a poem. The term 'crumpled' could have, under the circumstances, a double meaning: it described the physical state of the piece of paper and the censorship of poetry in Hungary. In 1970, the artist wrote 'I eat, speak, shit, sleep, write' on a piece of paper stamped with the word 'authorized'. The piece, entitled *Protest Poem*, referred to the Communist practice of requiring permissions and authorizations for any activity, individual or collective. The artist also created a series of works (objects, paintings and drawings) using the motif of a rope and clearly invoking metaphoric references to being restrained, bound and deprived of freedom, all of which had an unambiguous meaning within the context of a Communist state. I have also already mentioned that in 1968 Lakner created one of the

most interesting commentaries on the Prague Spring in his *Wounded Knife*. The work consisted of a piece of paper with the handwritten phrase 'Sept. 1968' written in the top half and the phrase 'wounded knife' (in English) typed in the middle. Lakner was not alone. Of all the countries in the former Soviet bloc, Hungary produced the largest number of projects dealing with Czechoslovakia's invasion by the Warsaw Pact troops and the suppression of the movement towards greater independence. For instance, Tamás Szentjóby created *Portable Trench for Three Persons* (1969) and *Czechoslovak Radio* (1968/9), consisting of an ordinary brick.

In 1971 Lakner painted a series of canvases, *Quotations after George Lukács* (illus. 158). His choice of the Marxist theoretician was not accidental. Lukács's ideological writings on aesthetics provided an important theoretical



158. László  
Lakner,  
*Quotation after  
George Lukács*,  
1972.

justification of socialist realism, the official art doctrine of the Communist state. Lukács was also a Hungarian, and for a time served as the minister of culture under the Communist regime. He lived in Budapest and Lakner met him one day at a bookstore. Lukács gave him his book, which the artist subsequently subjected to various art 'manipulations' and transformations. He transformed it from a text into an 'object' by tying it with a string and hanging it on a wall. He tied it with string to a stick, creating a form of a hammer or cleaver. He also drew it and printed its image as a graphic motif. By ironically 'objectifying' Lukács's work, Lakner not only removed its original meaning but also neutralized the ideological power of Lukács's theoretical statements. The theories were rendered absurd through the humorous treatment of the book given to the artist by the philosopher. They were defused, deprived of their political and ideological potency and tamed by ridicule.

It is also worth mentioning that Lakner made many works that referred to the Hungarian proletarian revolution and Hungarian Soviet Republic, proclaimed in 1918. Among others, the artist painted a canvas depicting the congratulatory telegraph sent by Lenin on the behalf of the Russian Bolsheviks



159. László Lakner,  
Telegram, 1974.

160. László  
Lakner,  
Stamps, 1974.

GRAFIKAI CSOPORT  
KÖNYOMDAI SZAKOSZTÁLY.

51 *prauklajos*



53

A PAPÍR-ÉS NYOMDAI ANYAG HIVATAL  
I. SZÁMÚ FLOKCIÓ TÁVOLÍTÁSI  
(volt GALIZIA TÉRÉN A. V. S.)

54 *személyes rendelésre és telephelyre  
szállítási engedéllyel  
SZERETETBŐRUMA*

55

Vallásügyi Liquidáló Országos Biztosság



56



58



59

“ÖRSZÁGOS GYERMEKÖDÜLÉSI HIVAT”

GAZDASÁGI OSZTÁLY



60



62

→ *gewalt*

to the Hungarian Communist ‘comrades’, the leaders of the new state based in the dictatorship of the proletariat (*Telegram*; illus. 159). He also painted an oil canvas depicting various official stamps dating from the period of this short-lived Communist state, 1918–19 (*Stamps*; illus. 160).

Work by Hungarian artists that was politically engaged was an exception rather than a norm within East European conceptual art of the 1970s. This does not mean, however, that other conceptual artists did not produce critical works, though the character of their criticism generally did not have directly political implications. The Yugoslav art scene provides a number of examples

of such attitudes. Although Yugoslav neo-avant-garde art, also known here as the ‘new art practice’,<sup>17</sup> was rarely directly political and, in general, did not articulate political positions, it was nevertheless highly critical in character, especially with respect to the hierarchies of the local culture. Of course, some Yugoslavian artists did produce conceptual projects that had a politically critical character. Some of those projects, for instance the works of Mladen Stilinović, constitute one of the most interesting aspects of the Yugoslav art scene but, in general, they belonged to the later, post-Tito period of the 1980s.

Bojana Pejić and Dunja Blažević have observed that during the 1960s and ’70s Modernism rose to the rank of the official art in Yugoslavia.<sup>18</sup> A similar process took place in Poland, though perhaps not to the same extent.<sup>19</sup> Pejić writes that Modernist art was not only embraced as the official art of the Yugoslav state, but the entire system of Modernist values (the ‘rhetoric of purity’, the autonomy of art, its apolitical character and self-preferentiality, its independence from external circumstances, the cult of the author and so on) became the dominant value system of the local art world. Considered within the historic context of Yugoslavia, Pejić characterized this local variant of Modernism as Socialist Modernist form that played a similar role to the Socialist Realism of the other Communist countries. To a large extent, the official status of Socialist Modernism was so powerful because it was ‘politically neutral’.<sup>20</sup> This was also the position embraced by the local art institutions, ‘dominated’ by the discourse and visuality of Modernism.<sup>21</sup> It is not surprising, given that context, that neo-avant-garde works, including conceptual art, often trained their critical apparatus on the axiology and sociology of Modernism, and as such could be interpreted from a political perspective, even though they tended not to make directly political statements.

The beginnings of conceptual art in Yugoslavia can be traced to the late 1950s and the founding of the group Gorgona in Croatia.<sup>22</sup> One could say that Gorgona’s members were the first to formulate the basic principles of conceptualism not only in Eastern Europe, but in the world. In the second half of the 1960s the Slovene group OHO also quickly moved in the direction of conceptual art, creating its own, unique version of conceptualism known as conceptual transcendentalism.<sup>23</sup> In the 1970s conceptual art spread throughout the country.<sup>24</sup>

I do not wish to provide a survey of this rich historic material, but rather to focus on the special case of Goran Trbuljak’s work.<sup>25</sup> In 1981, at his Belgrade ‘retrospective’, Trbuljak combined all his previous statement-works into a single ‘retrospective’ statement: ‘I do not wish to show anything new and original [Zagreb, 1971]; The fact that someone has a chance to make an exhibition is more important than what will be exhibited at that exhibition [Zagreb, 1973]; With this exhibition I am demonstrating the continuity of my work [Zagreb, 1979]’. The

statement, which comprised the entire contents of the artist's 'retrospective', summed up the entire body of his work. Of course, Trbuljak produced many more pieces than those three statements during the years preceding the Belgrade 'exhibition'. Particularly interesting were his projects that took the form of a referendum. For instance, in 1972 the artist distributed to passers-by a questioner containing a single inquiry: 'An artist is anyone who is given the opportunity to be one. Is this Goran Trbuljak an artist or no? Yes/ No [sic]'. Later, visiting Parisian art galleries (Bama, Lambert, Sonnabend, Templon and others) (illus. 161, 162), he presented their owners with a question: 'Would you like this work to be shown at your gallery? 1. yes, 2. no, 3. maybe'.<sup>26</sup> The question was accompanied by a photograph of the building facade in which the gallery was located.



161. Goran  
Trbuljak,  
27 October  
1972, I entered  
..., 1972.

LE 27.10.1972 JE SUIS ENTRÉ DANS LA GALERIE DANIEL TEMPLON  
30 RUE RAVIGNAN PARIS ET M'IDENTIFIÉ PAR MON PROFESSION-DOCUMENTATION J'AUTOUR LA QUESTION SUIVANTE  
EN PRIANT LE MÉ REPONDRE PAR OUI OU NON OU PEUT-ETRE:  
VOULiez-VOUS EXPOSER CE TRAVAIL DANS VOTRE GALERIE ?  
1. OUI—  
2. NON—  
3. PEUT-ETRE—

DIRECTIONS DE LA GALERIE

ARTISTE ABSENTE

*daniel templon*

At first Trbuljak did not identify himself as an artist and did not give out his last name; later he changed his strategy. Only Yvon Lambert accepted his 'proposal'.<sup>27</sup> That is however, largely irrelevant. What is significant are the issues raised by the artist's 'statements' and his 'questioners'. In the first place, Trbuljak used them to critique the basic principles and values of Modernism: the cult of the author, the understanding of the work's originality based in sensual-visual experience and the notion of aesthetics. Second, he subjected to a critique the institutional system of galleries and exhibitions that constituted the work of art, revealing the system's imprecise and dubious selection/rejection criteria. According to the artist, that system created rather than merely 'revealed' the values that the work of art was supposed to objectively possess.



This radical critique, produced in the language of conceptual art, posed not only epistemological questions ('What is a work of art?' 'Who is an artist?' 'What is a gallery or an exhibition?'), but also, and perhaps above all, ethical ones: what is the meaning of art practice in a situation when art values are revealed as an illusion and, simultaneously, as products of the system? Although the radicalism of Trbuljak's conceptual art was directed against art culture as such, within the context of Yugoslavia and its Socialist Modernism it acquired a specifically politically critical character. It is worth noting that other Croatian conceptual artists situated within the 'classic', namely linguistically based, conceptual practice, such as Boris Bućan, Boris Demur, Vlado Martek, Željko Jerman and Josip Stošić, engaged in the deconstruction of the art language of Modernism but did not subject the entire art system to such a radical, ethical critique.

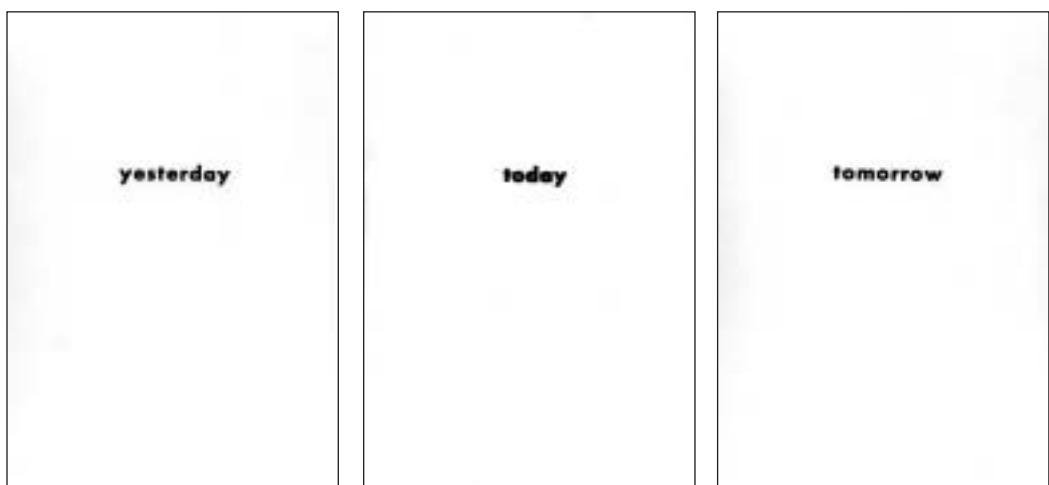
László Beke suggested that linguistically based art practice defined the unique character of East European conceptual art.<sup>28</sup> This type of work was certainly very popular. However, its significance varied considerably across the region. It meant something quite different in Yugoslavia, in particular in the case of such a radical artist as Trbuljak, from what it meant in Czechoslovakia. In general, conceptualism was not as widespread or developed in Czechoslovakia as it was in Yugoslavia or Poland, though there were certainly Czech and Slovak artists producing conceptual pieces. For instance, conceptualism developed in Bratislava through such projects as the earlier mentioned *Happsoc* events organized by Stano Filko and Alex Mlynářčík. One should also mention Július Koller's works from the early 1960s, which aimed at a critical deconstruction of painting (the fetish of the art culture), but which were firmly rooted in the Modernist value system.

In the 1970s Jiří Valoch, an artist, theorist, art critic and art historian, as well as an energetic organizer, played a key role in transforming Brno into a dynamic centre of 'classic' conceptualism. Valoch's small books published during this period could be seen as an extreme case of this type of practice and, without a doubt, must be seen as one of the most radical and internally consistent examples of the work identified by Beke as paradigmatic East European conceptualism. For instance, the artist's *Day-and-Night Book* (1971) consisted of two pages: one black and one white. His book *8 concepts* (1971) had eight pages, each of which contained a single English word: 'sometimes', 'somewhere', 'sometime', 'somebody', 'someone', 'something', 'somehow' and 'somewhat'. *Symmetrical Concept* (1972) had three pages, each with a single English word: 'yesterday', 'today' and 'tomorrow' (illus. 163). In *Do it yourself – Dialogue* (1972), the artist presented a somewhat more complicated structure. On several pages, Valoch included indications of a dialogue: 'A: ... ?' and 'B... . !', leaving open the possibility of its construction by the reader.

J. H. Kocman's series of short publications produced during the same period, *My Activity*, had a similar tone and appearance. It consisted of economic and tautological statements presenting particular bits of 'information'. For example, his *Report No. 17 'Touch Activity'* (no date) included a statement in English: 'this page was touched by the fingers of j. h. Kocman'. In *Monograph on my Stamps* (illus. 164), the artist stamped dozens of different statements onto the pages: 'white' (stamped on the white background), 'all written on this page is a poem by j. h. kocman', 'remember me', 'love is my art activity', 'yes, I am j. h. kocman', 'I am waiting for your touch', 'do you need a poem?', 'Love-Life-Art' and so forth.

These two artists were not alone in producing those kinds of projects. Dalibor Chartný also published similar books between 1971 and 1973. However, it is not my intention to provide a survey this phenomenon. Rather, I am interested in interpreting this work in its local historic context, namely in relation to 'normalization' and the repression of Czechoslovak culture in the wake of the suppression of the Prague Spring as well as the local reaction against this situation. Within this tense political climate, any more or less independent artistic activity, one that departed to a certain degree from the accepted standard, was perceived as a potential expression of dissident sentiments. Although Czechoslovak artists did not make directly political works like the Hungarian conceptualists and did not engage in an explicit critique of the official discourse and art system like the Yugoslav artists, their works had a political significance within the specific context of their production and reception. Linguistically based conceptual artists who used tautology were not only observed with a great deal of suspicion by the Czechoslovak authorities,

163. Jiří Valoch,  
*Symmetrical Concept*, 1972.





164. J. H.  
Kocman,  
*Monograph on*  
*my Stamps*,  
no date.

165. Zbigniew Gostomski,  
Fragment of  
the System: It  
Begins in  
Wrocław, 1970.



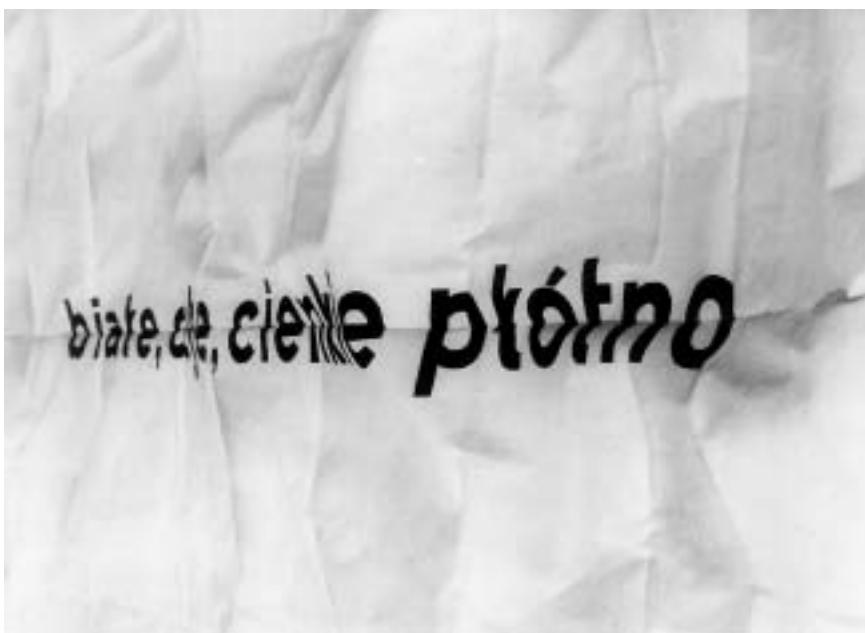
**Zbigniew Gostomski O/  
FRAGMENT UKŁADU  
(CENTRUM WROCŁAWIA)  
FRAGMENT OF THE SYSTEM  
(THE WROCŁAW CITY)**

but also constituted, together with other neo-avant-garde practitioners, a type of opposition against the cultural 'normalization' and repression of the intellectual community after 1968. Even though on the surface this type of work had nothing to do with politics, the fact that any artist who, for instance, wrote the statement 'this is a statement' was seen as a potential subversive, and as such was always potentially subject to repressive measures, made this work implicitly critical of the power system.

Such an analysis cannot be applied to Polish conceptual art produced during the 1970s.<sup>29</sup> Here the phenomenon of conceptualism encompassed the entire country and had a truly impressive scale. I have already mentioned several interesting examples. One must also acknowledge such artists as Andrzej Berezański, who in 1975 created a work entitled *Transformation of Energy* consisting simply of a verbal statement: 'transformation of energy'.

Andrzej Dłużniewski, the author of *Łódź Piece* (1972) proposed that nine seconds of silence should be observed in a selected section of the city that should be rotated by seventeen degrees. Zbigniew Gostomski created *Fragment of the System: It Begins in Wrocław* (1970) for the Wrocław '70 symposium (illus. 165). The work, which I discussed in the previous chapter, proposed systematic distribution on a grid pattern of not very large and not very heavy 'o' elements throughout the globe beginning in Wrocław. One could also mention Zdzisław Jurkiewicz, who among others created a piece *White, Clean, Thin Linen* (1970) by writing the words 'white, clean, thin linen' on a piece of cloth of that description (illus. 166).

There is a significant need for a revision and reevaluation of the history of Polish conceptual art. Despite claims made in the early 1980s during the period of turmoil connected with the formation of an organized political opposition and the founding of Solidarity, which attributed a politically radical character to the neo-avant-garde, it is difficult to dismiss Stefan Morawski's lucid assessment of the situation. Writing in 1981, Morawski observed that 'oppositional attitudes were not readily apparent in this type of work', and added that 'this was a strange revolt [when it happened], that urged, above all, study of cybernetics and Wittgenstein, and that saw salvation in semiotics'.<sup>30</sup> The difference between Poland and Czechoslovakia rests in the difference of context and historic frames of references. Unlike the Czechoslovak regime, the



166. Zdzisław Jurkiewicz,  
*White, Clean,  
Thin Linen*,  
1970.

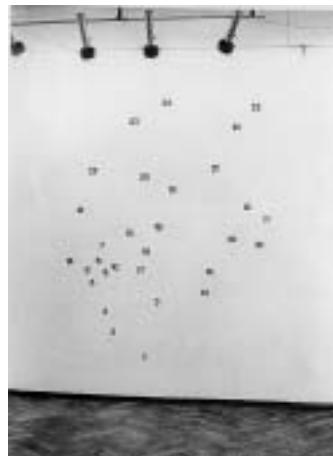
Polish authorities did not take neo-avant-garde practice, including conceptual art, very seriously. They did not see it as a threat and rather rapidly accepted it as part of the official art scene, so long as the artists refrained from dealing with political issues. The majority of Polish conceptualists, unlike their Hungarian colleagues, were willing to respect those implicit rules. In this context it is impossible to speak of any large-scale political critique of the system of power. It would be equally difficult to compare the character of Polish conceptual art with the critical function of Yugoslav conceptualism. Although Modernism had similar status in both countries, in Poland it was never identified as the official state style, and therefore never attained the status of Socialist Modernism. The most important difference, however, rests elsewhere. In Poland, unlike in Yugoslavia, conceptual artists never questioned the Modernist value system. Although they routinely undermined the institutional system created by the convergence of the socialist state and the Modernist art practice, they did not reject the Modernist theory of the artwork based on the belief in its social, political and artistic autonomy. As a result, conceptual art in Poland, although it participated in the global revision of Modernist culture, did not reject its essence, namely the principle of an autonomous work of art.

This fundamental art-historic contradiction which characterized Polish conceptualism was the legacy of the traumatic experience of the 1950s, when art was brought under the control of political propaganda. This experience created what could be described as a complex of Socialist Realism, a conviction that any move in the direction of political engagement could lead to re-instrumentalization of the art practice and, consequently, to the loss of artistic 'freedom'.<sup>31</sup> It is therefore impossible to use Victor Burgin's definition of postmodernism (applied to neo-avant-garde and conceptualism), which states that the appearance of those forms of art practice ended 'art theory', understood as the theory of an isolated, autonomous art practice within the context of Polish culture.<sup>32</sup> Naturally, this form of depolitization of the art practice through continuation of the Modernist theory of the artwork and the mythology of culture was exceedingly convenient for the Communist authorities. It provided insurance against a politically engaged practice that could formulate a cogent critique of the regime and its system of power, or at least against direct expression of such sentiments.

This did not mean that Polish conceptualism was completely uncritical, though its critiques tended to be directed against culture rather than politics. I will illustrate this point by discussing the work of one of the most prominent Polish conceptual artists, Jarosław Kozłowski.<sup>33</sup> In his work from the 1970s Kozłowski combined a radically anti-institutional attitude with an equally radical artistic position striving for purification of the artistic language. I

mentioned earlier his role in the development of the international art exchange network NET, based on completely private, entirely extra-institutional contacts, and the Poznań gallery Akumulatory 2, directed by Kozłowski, which functioned outside the system of the official and professional art venues. The gallery's role was entirely controlled by the invited artist's decision concerning the scope and the form of his exhibition. The artists who were invited to show at Akumulatory 2 came from the West as well as Eastern Europe. They covered the cost of their own travel, slept in Kozłowski's apartment and did not receive an honorarium (neither did the artist for directing the gallery). The funds received from the student union were entirely spent on posters and invitations. Akumulatory 2 gallery functioned not only outside the official exhibition system, but also on the periphery of the well-developed unofficial system of studio-based galleries and other alternative spaces that appeared in Poland during the 1970s. In comparison with Akumulatory 2 the Warsaw gallery Foksal, a venue with a well-established international reputation, was a 'major' institution. It had staff, an office, its own space, accounting and so on, even though, in reality, its resources were rather meagre.

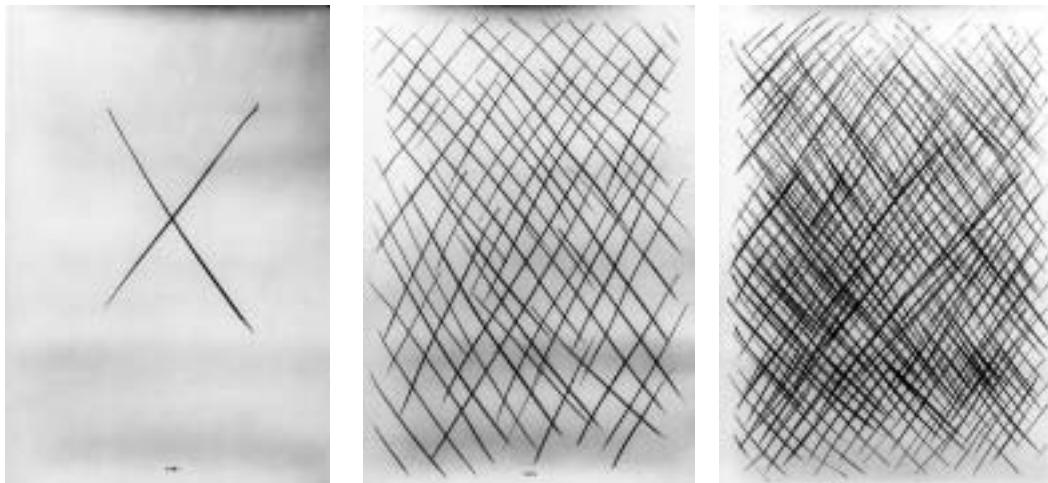
Considered in the context of his other activities, Kozłowski's art acquires a significant critical dimension. By concentrating on the deconstruction and analysis of the art language, it nevertheless delivers a poignant critique of the art system. In 1971 Kozłowski showed his *Apparatus* at the Foksal Gallery. The work analysed the possibilities of representing reality offered by the photographic camera. The artist produced the tautologically and linguistically based works *Metaphysics-Physics-Ics* (1974), *Exercises in Aesthetics* (1976) and *Time, Weight and Amount Drawings* (1979). *Metaphysics-Physics-Ics*, shown at the Foksal Gallery, consisted of three installations of a photograph of the same interior furnished with simple, ordinary furniture (illus. 167). In the first installation, the photograph depicted the room according to normal conventions of naturalistic photography. The only departure from that norm was the fact that the furniture in the photo was numbered. The image was accompanied by an audio track consisting of a series of questions and answers: 'what is this?' – 'this is a table'; 'what is this?' – 'this is a chair' and so on. In the second installation, the photograph of the room showed only pure and abstract play of light. The image is accompanied by a soundtrack that described the situation in a subjunctive mode: 'for instance, if a stool stands next to a bed, than pictures hang on walls'. In the third installation (*Ics*), the numbers corresponding to the furnishings were attached directly to the wall in the appropriate places corresponding to the location of the furniture in the original photograph. The soundtrack consists of an alphabetic list of adjectives: 'absolute, absorbing, abstract, absurd . . .' In *Exercises in Aesthetics*, Kozłowski



167. Jarosław Kozłowski,  
*Metaphysics-  
Physics-lcs*,  
1974.

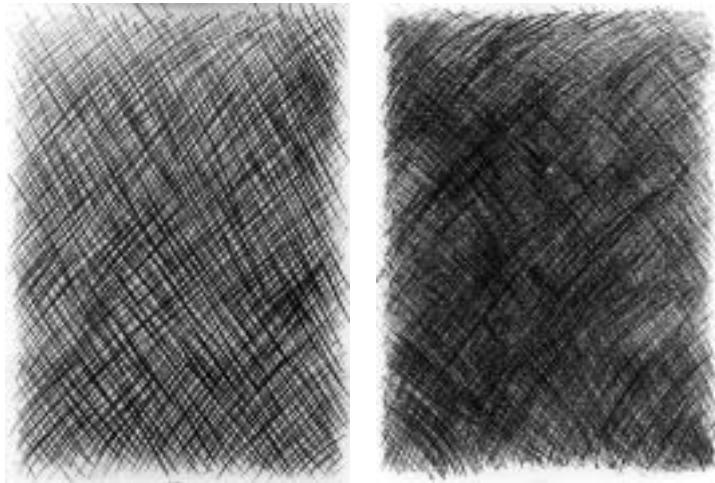
subjects a colour field to analysis by annotating it with the statement ‘neither beautify, nor ugly’. This foundation provided a base for the demonstration of a general law of logic based on tautological reasoning and aimed at defining aesthetic neutrality, or the so-called zero-value. The ‘contents’ of Kozłowski’s *Weight Drawings* (1979) was defined by the weight of the used graphite or the time spent on the drawing (illus. 168). This series functioned as a ‘brick wall’ for the tautological investigation. It had a function comparable to that which Mihail Tarabukin attributed to Aleksander Rodchenko’s ‘colour’ pictures from the 1920s. Whereas Rodchenko, a member of the classic Soviet avant-garde, used colour to completely reify the work of art, Kozłowski used the material weight of graphite and equally precisely defined the period of time during which the drawing had to be completed (a reference to the avant-garde utopia of the forth dimension) to accomplish an analogous task. However, in contrast to Rodchenko, who upon facing that ‘brick wall’ rejected the ‘reist’ meaning of art and instead looked to another aspect of the Modernist mythology of the work, namely the work understood in the context of the industrial and propaganda production of Socialism, Kozłowski took on the role of a ‘deconstructor’ of the art mythology. He began to analyse not only the art language but also the function of art in the broader cultural context. However, those investigations took place in the 1980s and as such exceed the temporal boundaries of this chapter.<sup>34</sup>

There were a lot of works produced in Poland during the 1970s that engaged in tautological analysis of language and were often published as small books. It is not my intention to list them all. Rather, I would like to raise the issue of their critical function vis-à-vis the system of art. Those works did not question the power system and did not engage in directly political critique.



Neither did they challenge the Modernist status of the work, its autonomy and self-referential character; on the contrary, they completely inscribed themselves into that formula. In that sense, they continued the Modernist theory of the work, bringing it to its logical conclusion. By purifying the work of art, or rather art language, Kozłowski attempted to defend its core and essence against all external institutional, political or commercial factors and pressures. Whether that essentializing strategy was effective against political manipulation and indoctrination and whether it produced new knowledge about ideological and political system of power is a different question. Certainly, it was much less effective than Kozłowski's other ventures, more directly critical of the art institutions, such as *NET* or gallery Akumulatory 2. But that is not the point. What one must keep in mind is that those overtly critical activities were firmly grounded in his work.

The problem of providing a context for such practice aimed at purification of the art language and locating a specific target of its critical thrust can be found in Polish culture of the 1970s, above all in film, in particular in the activities of the Workshop of the Film Form founded in 1970 in Łódź. Józef Robakowski, one of the leading figures associated with the Workshop, frequently stressed that film's functioning as an analysis of the film language also revealed the internal structure and mechanisms of the function of the narrative cinema, one of the main tools of manipulation and secret political indoctrination of the public.<sup>35</sup> Ryszard Kluszczyński's analysis of the work produced by the Workshop stressed this implicitly political function of the analytic works produced by the group's members.<sup>36</sup> However, it should be noted that the works produced by members of the Workshop did not engage



in a direct critique of the ideology or the politics of the culture invested in the industry of narrative cinema. Rather, they attempted to educate the viewer by providing an analysis of the formal structure of film and thereby enabling him to himself engage in such analysis. Above all, by producing 'minimal', analytic, extremely economical films, the artists associated with the Workshop defined an alternative to overblown, ideological, commercial and narrative-literary film productions.

Some of the best examples of this contrast are provided by films produced by Józef Robakowski, for instance in his series of short films *Tests* (1971). *Tests I* consisted of the projection of irregular spots produced by the damage to the film strip. In *Tests II*, the appearance of a blank screen interrupted the projection of a rectangle accompanied by music. In his film *Exercises* (1972–3), individual letters appearing on the screen were accompanied by sounds that had been previously assigned to them. Robakowski also personalizes, if one can say that, his work, simultaneously rejecting the notion of romantic expression specific to the film medium. He was not interested in revealing the artist's 'spirit', but rather in extending his body through the film. In the film *I'm Walking* (1973), the artist climbed a tall tower counting the steps while filming the surrounding landscape. His count at the beginning of the film is steady and rhythmic. As he moves up, he gets progressively more and more winded. The viewer listening to the counting observes the image of a 'revolving' landscape projected from an ever higher vantage point. The film ends when the artist reached the top and takes in the last breath of relief. The film engenders a certain connection between the artist, who counts and films the landscape, and the viewer who accompanies and mentally urges him on.

168. Jarosław Kozłowski,  
*Weight Drawings*, 1979,  
National Museum,  
Poznań.

This link is not achieved through the narrative editing, dialogue and action of conventional cinema, but rather through a filmic extension of the author's body. With a similar dose of dramatic irony, Robakowski recounted the history of his fingers in the film *About Fingers* (1979), in which the viewer observes the artist's fingers while listening to a fascinating story about their function within the hand and their role in the artist's life.

To sum up, the critical character of those films does not rest in their direct attack on commercial production, but in their suggestion of a possibility of an alternative structure for film and its alternative social function – its 'private' productions and viewing. In the 1980s the artist would also produce films that referred more directly to the language of mass visual communication and therefore to politics. For instance, his film *Brezhnev's Funeral* (1982), which consisted of montaged television newsreels, deconstructed and demystified the language of television news, in particular the mood of pathos and tension created by the editors and reporters, who professed to provide the viewers with information but in fact engaged in ideological and propagandistic manipulation. But these were different times from the 1970s. General Wojciech Jaruzelski had just introduced martial law, de-legalizing, and at the same time criminalizing, the largest workers' union in Europe, Solidarity. This was a period of dynamic development for enormous underground political structures and anti-Communist opposition. The military junta used television as an aggressive propaganda instrument. At the same time, this interventionist project, which analysed the language of TV news and revealed the methods through which television manipulated the audience, could not have been made were it not for the experience which Robakowski gained through the experiments he carried out in the context of the Workshop of the Film Form.

# 9

## The Politics of Identity: Male and Female Body Art

Looking through the catalogue of the Slovene exhibition *Body and the East*, one could easily come away with the impression that female body art was not nearly as popular in Eastern Europe during the period of the Communist regime as was male body art.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon could be relatively easily explained by the status of women within the Communist system, a system that not only embraced the phallocentric and patriarchal principles of bourgeois culture, but also implemented its own idiosyncratic barriers to women's political, social and cultural emancipation. The *Body and the East* catalogue does not suggest that female artists were less interested in their own (or other women's) bodies than their male counterparts, but rather that there were fewer women artists in Eastern Europe than male artists, a situation that was not that dissimilar from that in the west of Europe or in the United States. There is another, equally pragmatic, observation that can be made with regards to this issue. Due to the specific historic and political circumstances present in Eastern Europe, Modernism persisted here much longer than in the West. Hence art practice based in criticism of the Modernist paradigm had in this region of Europe a much stronger foundation and a much longer duration than elsewhere. Female body art, fully implicated in the neo-avant-garde art practice, had to slowly make its way through the labyrinth of artistic values and only gradually and with difficulty found broader interest in the questions which it raised. Feminism, the entanglement of the female body in verbal and visual cultural discourses, existential, cultural and biological references to the politics of female identity and the body used as a referent for the constructions and deconstructions of subjectivity, were rarely if ever considered or understood by the curators and critics.

However, there were a number of artists in the region who addressed those issues in a direct and consistent way. I will begin the discussion of this

work with an analysis of a series of projects by Alina Szapocznikow, a Polish artist trained in Prague, and working, especially towards the end of her short life, in Paris, within the orbit of *les nouveaux réalistes* gathered around Pierre Restany. By mentioning that affiliation I do not intend to suggest a thesis concerning the work of this pioneering artist, one of the first Europeans to tackle the issue of female body art. Naturally, Szapocznikow dealt with some of the issues that interested the *nouveaux réalistes*, but Restany's interest in the Polish artist clearly demonstrates that the fascination was mutual. Rather, I will contextualize her work within the development of the neo-avant-garde, with which it had a tense relationship.<sup>2</sup>

Urszula Czartoryska, the author of an essay published in the catalogue of the artist's major retrospective exhibition, observed that Szapocznikow began to develop interest in the body and, above all, to explore the aesthetics of body fragments in a series of works entitled *Leg*, produced between 1962 and 1965 in versions that used different methods and media (illus. 169). From that moment on, the artist stopped her formal sculptural explorations and



169. Alina Szapocznikow,  
*Leg*, c. 1967.  
Muzeum Sztuki,  
Łódź.

170. Alina Szapocznikow, *Multiple Self-Portrait*, 1967. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.



began to produce a rich *oeuvre* of works focused on the body. This work culminates in her *Multiple Self-Portrait* (illus. 170), which opened the way for ‘all the multiplied body fragments’ that the artist would use later on.<sup>3</sup> She created a number of other works that combined different materials and used polyester and polyurethane. By the end of the 1960s, when the artist was diagnosed with breast cancer, her work dealing with the body took on a very different significance in aesthetic as well as existential terms.

Agata Jakubowska, searching for a link between the artist’s early work and her later projects produced during the period of her sickness, stresses the

importance of another piece also concerned with the aesthetics of the body fragment, a mould of the abdomen that gave rise to a series of works in marble (*Great Bellies*) and polyester, such as the spectacular *Large Beach* (1968; illus 171).<sup>4</sup> However, the body – or rather body-fragment – that appears in those pieces is unconnected with the artist's own body. The model for the 'abdomen' series was provided by Arianne, a friend of the artist Roland Topor.<sup>5</sup> According to Jakubowska, those works shifted the focus from visual perception to tactile experience, and hence suggested the greater importance of physicality and materiality over visuality. If one were to consider this shift from the perspective of a feminist deconstruction of culture and the critique of the gaze, it is certain that Szapocznikow could be considered to have made an important contribution to such discussion. However, the majority of those who have written about the artist agree that she did not pursue a path that led to this kind of feminist critique.<sup>6</sup> Her interest was focused on formal issues: the production of a shape rather than the deconstruction of the cultural perception of the female body. Szapocznikow's works are inscribed within the Modernist aesthetic tradition. They engage that tradition in a dialogue and challenge it by their reliance on the tactile fragment, but ultimately do not undermine the primacy of vision. Neither do they weaken to a significant degree its 'determining' function within the central relationship of the phallocentric culture, that between the subject (the viewer) and the object (the viewed). The viewing subject, who gazes and therefore exercises control, is identified with the male element; the viewed object, namely the female body, is subjected through the gaze to a type of control. Fragmentation of the body destabilizes those relations. The mimetic quality of the belly's mould and its provocative tactility also challenges that system of dependencies. Paradoxically, both destroy the wholeness of the



171. Alina Szapocznikow, *Large Beach*, 1968, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.



desired object by materializing the body. But in the end, the finish of the details and the composition of the works unites the fragments formally into a whole and thereby returns them to the aesthetic sphere. This aesthetization limits the works' critical potential, but also defends them against literalness.

This ambivalence of meaning, the balancing act performed on the border between a critical and an aesthetic statement, acquired much greater power and dynamism at the moment when the artist found out about her illness and focused her attention on her own sick and dying body. Precisely because she did not reject aesthetics, defending herself against the 'materiality' of representation and veristic exhibitionism that would become such an important element of the body art in the next decades, her art acquired a great expressive power contained within the tension between the experienced biology and the perceived form. The latter universalized the particular body without depriving it of its subjective character. After being diagnosed with breast cancer and undergoing a mastectomy, the artist observed that 'one must preserve everything that the surgeon extracts and discards during the operation, everything that is discarded, bloodied'.<sup>7</sup> The works she produced out of that experience can be seen as such 'extracted and discarded' tumours. They may be discarded, but they are still one's own, now lost, body parts that persist in the consciousness

172. Alina Szapocznikow, *Great Tumour I*, 1969. Private collection.

and maintain their presence despite amputation and surgical intervention. They are parts of the body that the subject continues to feel and own.

The work *Great Tumour I*, produced in 1969 (illus. 172), provides a vivid example of such a relationship to the body. A photograph of a face of a pretty woman (the artist's own) is encased in an irregular mass of polyester. The contrast between her physical beauty and the formlessness of the mass is further emphasized by the placement of the 'tumour' directly on the floor (that is how it was intended to be exhibited by the artist). The work appears abandoned in a similar manner to the later *Personified Tumours* (1971), which the artist photographed scattered on a lawn. According to Jakubowska, this piece functions as 'a form of a self-portrait'.<sup>8</sup> Its expressive power rests not only in the fact that the face appears imprisoned in the plastic mass, but also in the manner of its exhibition. The viewers walk by the face, generally fully dressed and wearing shoes, a fact that creates a powerful contrast with the defenceless, 'naked', tortured and sick body. In another work, *Alina's Funeral* (illus. 173), the artist also embedded multiple photographs of her face in a formless mass of polyester and fibreglass. Although this work is intended to hang on the wall like a relief, a location that enables much more 'comfortable' viewing than the confrontational encounter with a object placed directly (without any pedestal) on the floor, here, too, the impression of imprisonment of the body is identified and aggressive mass is highly suggestive.

If subjectivity is embodied, then the embodiment that appears to be without defined boundaries questions the very notion of contained subjectivity.



173. Alina Szapocznikow, *Alina's Funeral*, 1970. National Museum, Kraków.

The 'I' is identified with a decomposing body in the process of losing its integrity and becoming increasingly formless. The body as such is not rejected or reviled, neither is it repulsive or rendered 'abject' in the manner described by Julia Kristeva.<sup>9</sup> The artist's relationship to her body (as tumour) is determined neither by such 'repulsion' nor by desire, but rather by a dramatic sensitivity, or even a certain kind of eroticism. One could come away with the impression that the artist's work was increasingly eroticized over the course of her illness. The breast cancer and the damage suffered by her body provide the inspiration for an erotic awakening that functions as a form of compensation for the loss. The delicate and formally beautiful manner in which this eroticism is expressed renders it both fragile and sensitive. The loss of the breast is particularly significant in this context, since this part of the female body has not only a functional but also an aesthetic character. In the process of human evolution, the aesthetic has acquired an erotic function. The importance of the erotic dimension in human development underpins the significance of breasts within the physical development as well as culture.<sup>10</sup> Women's breasts are, therefore, by definition and in essence erotic. Radical mastectomy not only deprives the female figure of its sexual (or erotic) apparel, but also gives rise to a desire for compensation, intensifying the need for sensual and bodily erotic expression. Towards the end of her life, when the disease was gaining the upper hand, Szapocznikow observed:

I produce only clumsy objects. This absurd and paralytic obsession points to the existence of some yet unknown to us gland necessary for life. I agree that this obsession can be reduced to a single gesture, available to anyone among us. This gesture in and of itself is sufficient; it confirms our human presence. My gesture is directed towards the human body, this 'totally erogenous sphere', towards its least defined and ephemeral experiences. [I want to] pay homage to the ephemeral in the recesses of our body, in the trace of our footsteps left on the earth.<sup>11</sup>

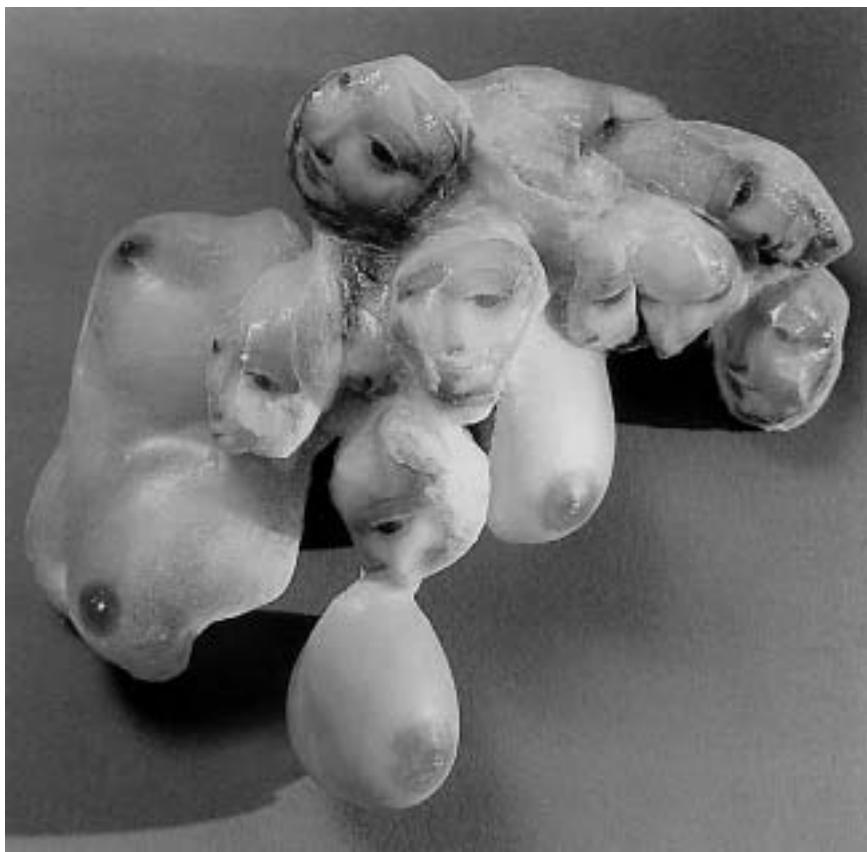
The artist's erotic gadgets produced during this period (*Lamp-Sculpture VI*, 1970; *Crazy White Fiancée*, 1971; illus. 174) do not exhibit aggressive sexuality; on the contrary, they are delicate, erotic, devoid of violence. Their beautiful, elegant forms, which recall *art nouveau* objects, emphasize their eroticism and yet, simultaneously, desexualize them. This is a Modernist strategy that uses form and aesthetics rather than the ideological literalness employed by postmodern, critical body art.<sup>12</sup> The fragmentation of the body, understood as a metaphoric reference to the idea of wholeness, is also situated within the Modernist tradition. Linda Nochlin has noted that Modernism engendered tensions between unification and fragmentation; it was

174. Alina Szapocznikow, *Crazy White Fiancée*, 1971. Private collection.



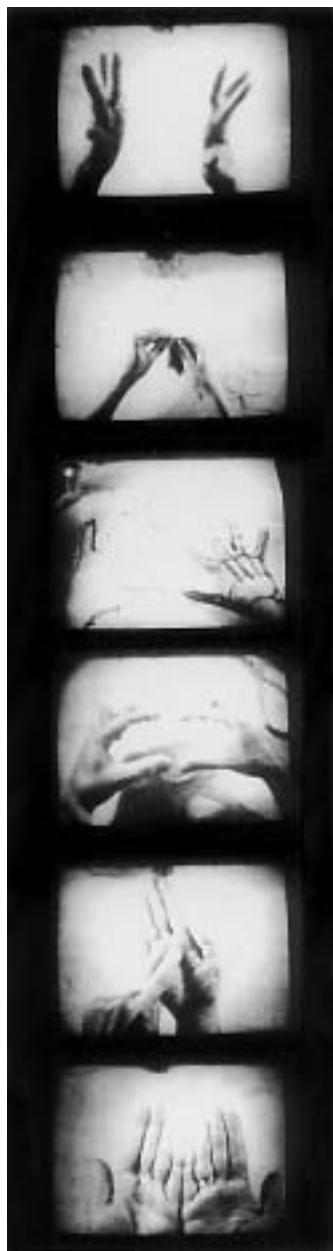
characterized by a desire for totality metaphorically expressed through the exploration of a fragment.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the appearance of the body fragment in Modernist art can be seen as a symptom of the utopian desire for totality and fullness. The body fragment used by Szapocznikow can be seen, therefore, as a metaphor of wholeness and her erotization of the fragment can be seen as a symptom of a desire for bodily integrity; as such it should be viewed as part of the Modernist visual strategy of representation.

Just as the earlier *Leg*, the work *Krużlowa* (illus. 175), produced during the period of the artist's illness and based on the idea of the body fragment, recalls neither the deconstructive strategy of the female body's fetishization, which, according to Freud, is supposed to be a response to the castration complex, nor the dread and repulsion that, according to Izabela Kowalczyk, are awakened by the object of one's fascination.<sup>14</sup> The polyester object, in which the artist embedded dolls' heads covered in gauze and to which she attached moulds of breasts (fragment of a beautiful body), does not awaken desire. Its erotic quality is, paradoxically, asexual; it is achieved through a far-reaching aesthetization of the object. The form becomes a medium through which Szapocznikow searches for bodily identity. This function is performed by the form rather than the equally asexual and dramatic veristic exhibitionism apparent in works of Szapocznikow's contemporaries such as Jo Spence, Hannah Wilke or later Katarzyna Kozyra (*Olympia*, 1996). These artists also searched for identity in their sick bodies, but did not do so through formal means. Rather, they opted



175. Alina Szapocznikow, *Krużlowa*, 1971. Polish Pallatines Chapel, Paris.

176. Geta Brătescu and Ion Grigorescu,  
*Hands*, 1977  
(still).



to exhibit the invisible diseased body, forced out of the sphere of visibility by consumer culture.

The Modernist tradition of the aesthetics of the body fragment described within Szapocznikow's art becomes even more apparent when the Polish

artist's work is compared with that of Geta Brătescu. Although this Romanian artist also used body fragments, she did so in a dramatically different way. For instance, in her film *Hands* (illus. 176), produced in collaboration with Ion Grigorescu, the hands shown in the film acquired the status of 'actors'. Rather than accentuating the aesthetic of the fragment, their function emphasized the systematic character and autonomy of the film sequence. Here the hands do not invoke a longing for a representation of an ideal wholeness or metaphoric unity; they are treated as an independent and self-sufficient element. The same observation can be made with regards to Brătescu's work *Self-Portrait: In the Direction of Whiteness* (1975).<sup>15</sup> I do not intend to suggest that those works do not have an affinity with the Modernist tradition. However, those influences are here transformed by and used within the neo-avant-garde practice. This neo-avant-garde tradition, which emphasizes the sequence of takes, systematic construction of the image and autonomy of the body fragment, appears much closer to the artist's work (at least in this instance), than the metaphoric use of a fragment to signify the whole.



177. Natalia LL (Lach-Lachowicz), *Art of Consumption*, 1972. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

If we return to Polish art of the 1970s, we can find yet another strategy for developing female identity through the exhibition of the body in the work of Natalia L. L. (Natalia Lach-Lachowicz), an artist for whom feminism constituted a central focus.<sup>16</sup> One of the artist's best-known works from the early 1970s, *Art of Consumption* (illus. 177), consists of a series of photographs depicting an attractive young woman eating bananas, hot dogs, Popsicles and so forth. The erotic subtext of those photographs is quite obvious. Moreover, they connect consumption with eroticism, invoking certain kinds of consumer eroticism pervasive throughout mass culture, employed by television commercials and illustrated magazines. The works of Natalia L. L. engage in a critique of this situation, which reifies eroticism, assimilating it with consumption and mass culture. They provide an interesting example of a work that reveals the functioning of the consumer society and examines its presence within visual culture. But this type of critique of the consumer culture, undertaken in a country in which consumption had neither an ideological nor a practical character, was rather problematic and, above all, ambiguous. In the early 1970s one encountered hot dogs sporadically in the Polish butcher's shops and customers eagerly formed lines for bananas, available in stores only during the winter holiday season. Consumption was only expected and hoped for by society and the authorities. The Polish regime of the 1970s wished to use consumerism to secure its legitimacy, though its efforts to shore up the economy and encourage development of a consumer culture ended in a complete economic as well as political disaster. The society likewise desired consumerism and, to a large extent, observed the Western culture of (consumer) spectacle uncritically. This was to be expected. One has to be able to consume, to have stores filled with hot dogs and bananas, in order to critique the consumed object as a fetish and a symbol.

From a social perspective, Natalia L. L.'s work was suspended in a vacuum. The problem of consumption was not the main focus of the critical weight of her work. If one approaches the *Art of Consumption* from a feminist perspective, one becomes aware of its political, specifically Polish, context. The Communist regime, especially during its 'enlightened' phase in the 1970s, attempted to mask its anti-female political agenda by staging various superficially pro-women schemes. Just as during the heroic years of Communism women seemed to play key roles in political, cultural and economic spheres, and their lives appeared to be shaped by the ideology of emancipation and empowerment, so in the 1970s the regime used similar language to emphasize its 'progressive' character. Superficiality was, however, the dominant characteristic of that decade. It is certain that the practice of selecting the delegates to the Party Congress from among various seamstresses, the practice of

holding meetings between the First Secretary of the Communist Party and the representatives of the Polish League of Women, or the solemn official celebrations of Women's Day on 8 March could not fully obscure the reality of the situation for women during this period. However, this issue reached beyond the policies and attitudes of the state and encompassed the generally negative attitude of Polish culture towards women. Those cultural attitudes were shaped by Catholic traditions, values, views and institutions, which during the 1970s were definitely not confined to the margins of social or political life.

Jakubowska, who analysed the artist's work from a perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, stressed the active role of the model and the 'demotion' of the symbolic presence of the phallic, male element to a status of an ordinary object of (female) consumption.<sup>17</sup> One could say that the model did not consume the phallus, but a penis, and did so with pleasure and sensual abandon. Jakubowska noted the active role of the woman and the absence of the man, or rather his instrumentalization. This reversal of traditional gender roles also reverses the conventions of traditional, heterosexual erotic representation. It is the woman who controls the situation and experiences pleasure; she uses the man without any scruples. Moreover, Jakubowska stresses that 'the consumption of "penises" by women is threatening for men because of the significance assigned to the phallus by the symbolic structures'.<sup>18</sup> The phallus represents power, men's power: consequently, the woman is defined within the tradition of Freudian psychoanalysis through 'lack' or 'deficit'. Although Lacan maintains that this order refers primarily to language (the 'lack' must be first defined as 'lack'), nevertheless such is the order of culture. It must be noted that in Natalia L. L.'s work the woman is not only the author and the active actor in the representation, but also its primary viewer. The female artist who creates the photograph looks at it and looks through the viewfinder of her camera. She takes on, therefore, a role traditionally assigned to men. Women were traditionally 'presented' to a man. They were passive and appeared; the man made decisions about their fate, holding in his hand (and his eye) the power to judge. Voyeurism, understood as a form of viewing from a safe location and a source of sexual pleasure (and therefore power), was reserved for men. Natalia L. L. reversed this schema, undermining the traditional relations between the sexes, and hence the traditional order of power within the context of gender. As such, her work constitutes a rare example of a critique of phallocentrism within East European art of the 1970s, though perhaps its power was to a certain extent defused by the less than concrete definition of consumption within Polish culture, the primary context and a frame of reference for the work.

If in Poland consumption belonged primarily to the sphere of desire rather than reality, in Yugoslavia, a country much more open to the West and much wealthier and freer in terms of the market situation, the issue of women's reification by the culture of spectacle and consumption was seen as a much more real social and political problem. One of the artists who addressed those issues was Sanja Iveković. Orly Lubin wrote that the artist explored in her works the problem of the body's simultaneous presence in two different spheres: the public and the private. Locating both in the public arena, something that becomes indispensable for the verification of identity created

178. Sanja  
Iveković,  
*Un jour tendre/*  
*Un jour  
violente/*  
*Un  
jour secrète,*  
1976.



through the tension between those two spheres, Ivezković defined this territory in political categories. She transformed the ‘politics of identity’ into the ‘politics of the body’ and later the ‘politics of the location’.<sup>19</sup>

This process can be already seen in the artist’s early works from the mid-1960s. However, Sandra Križić Raban observed that Ivezković’s performance *Un jour tendre/Un jour violente/Un jour secrète* from 1976 occupies a paradigmatic status within the artist’s entire *œuvre* (illus. 178).<sup>20</sup> The point of reference for the performance was provided by an article published in *Marie-Claire* magazine on how to create a make-up look for three different occasions, or, in other words, how to play three different ‘roles’ corresponding to three different times of the day: morning with ‘delicate’ make-up and dress, daytime with ‘aggressive’ and night with ‘mysterious’. The artist attempted to go through those transformations by making herself up and changing her dress in front of the audience. This strategy of rendering the production of identity public by inscribing oneself into the models generated by the consumer culture (the ‘natural’ culture of contemporaneity) exposed the tension between the bodily presence (and presentation) of a woman and her representation, image, visibility, which constituted the base of her public existence. According to this, perhaps too often repeated, thesis a woman ‘exists’ through her representation, through a ‘pose’ which she strikes before the (male) gaze of culture. Ivezković’s performance was accompanied by other works created during the same period, in particular *Double Life* (1975) and *Tragedy of Venus* (1976), which explored in a rather unambiguous way the issue of modelling one’s private life on the patterns of consumer culture provided and popularized by illustrated magazines, films and other mass media. From a technical perspective, those works were as straightforward as the *Un jour tendre/Un jour violente/Un jour secrète* performance. In the first work, the artist contrasted private photographs from her own life with different genres of advertisements published in illustrated magazines.

Ivezković provided the most developed analysis of those ideas, delving into the issue of the private/public existence of the body, identity, the body’s political location and disciplinary (police) control in the piece *Triangle*, performed in Zagreb on 10 May 1979 (illus. 179).<sup>21</sup> The artist created in the performance an ‘arranged’ – or perhaps more accurately ‘provoked’ – situation. The date of the performance is significant because it marked the date of the official visit to Zagreb of Marshal Tito and his wife. As is usually the case on such occasions, the authorities took special security precautions. The police, uniformed and undercover, as well as agents of the special services, were fully mobilized to ensure the president’s safety. Those agents became unwitting participants in Ivezković’s performance, which lasted eighteen minutes.





179. Sanja  
Iveković,  
*Triangle*, 1979.



The artist appeared on a balcony, an ambiguous and imprecisely defined space belonging equally to the private sphere (as an extension of the apartment) as to the public sphere of the street. As Bojana Pejić has noted, the balcony also functions as a female space, since it provides a ‘safe’ viewing distance from which a woman can observe the public life without leaving ‘her proper place’, the home.<sup>22</sup> The artist appearing on the balcony was invisible from below to the policemen guarding the president’s safety. A solid, concrete balustrade protected her privacy. She did not show any interest in what was happening below. Lying down on a bench, she began to read a book, sipping whiskey and making gestures suggesting masturbation. Her presence and activities were observed by a special services agent located on the roof of a neighbouring building. Because the distance between the buildings was considerable, the agent was probably equipped with a pair of binoculars and a radio. After 18 minutes, uniformed policemen entered the artist’s apartment, demanding ‘removal from the balcony of all persons and objects’. This ‘intervention’ concluded the performance.

Pejić observed that Ivezković performed *Triangle* in Yugoslavia, a Communist country that succeeded in combining consumer culture with Marxist ideology. It was a country where political police may have been omnipresent, but abortion was legal. It was a one-party state with a planned economy, and yet it was filled with the culture of commercial spectacle, erotic films, rock and roll, fashion, drugs and jeans. A bottle of Ballantine Whisky, which accompanied the artist, was nothing unusual there. In fact, this type of drink was more common in Yugoslavia than hot dogs or bananas would have been in Poland, even though state-run as well as private distilleries in the region produced a wide assortment of excellent rakijas. Despite the illusory atmosphere of liberalism, the citizens of Yugoslavia were rather carefully watched. They were observed because, as Foucault has noted, visual surveillance is one of the primary tools of social and political control. Although the difference between Foucault’s description of the ‘panoptic’ gaze used to discipline society and the situation provoked by the artist was considerable (in Foucault’s model, the guard is invisible and the prisoner does not know whether he is, in fact, physically present; in Yugoslavia, one not only knew that the guards were present, but also where they were located),<sup>23</sup> nonetheless *Triangle* explores the issue of the body and visual control in a rather unambiguous way. In other words, it deals with the visually based discipline to which the body, above all the female’s body and her sexual desires, is subjected.

If Ivezković simply stood on the balcony and watched the progress of the presidential cavalcade like the other inhabitants of the city, the police would not have demanded ‘removal from the balcony of all persons and objects’. The

act of masturbation, performed during a political spectacle, or, in other words, the act of manifesting female sexuality in a situation when the body should have been subjected to a general discipline governing public political behaviour, dramatically breached the decorum of roles assigned by the regime to its male and female citizens. The interruption by the police of the artist's masturbation performed in a semi-private, semi-public space revealed that the separation between the private and the public did not, in fact exist. The disciplinary system of surveillance was total, since it assigned a role to the body (in this case female body) within both spheres. The body, seeking an identity, found the definition of itself and its location within the disciplinary system of the total Communist regime. One could say that this system was doubly total: it took on the discipline of the consumer society (a fact explored in Ivezović's earlier works), but did not give up the Soviet-style, Eastern European system of political surveillance.

Among East European female artists, Marina Abramović has explored that problematic of body art to the furthest extent.<sup>24</sup> Because the artist has now lived and worked for a number of years in the West, her work belongs as much to the history of East European art as to the so-called 'general' history of the art produced in the recent decades. However both her personal biography and her professional career were connected with Yugoslavia,<sup>25</sup> and until a certain moment the Yugoslav neo-avant-garde culture of the 1970s functioned as the most important reference point for her art. Describing Yugoslav body art produced during the 1970s, Pejić identified several types of body-based work and situated Abramović's works within the sphere of 'the ritual body'. Pejić stressed that Abramović was the only woman within the group of artists with whom she exhibited, and she was the only individual who did not stop using her body as the primary 'material' of her art, despite the fact that she left Yugoslavia in 1976.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps that was one of the reasons for her persistence. After all, her decision to leave Yugoslavia coincided with the beginnings of her long-term performance partnership with Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen), which lasted through the 1980s. Their collaborative performances explored meeting of bodies and of sexes, their affinities and oppositions, their unity and duality. However, this work functioned in a different context from that relevant to Eastern Europe and hence, despite its appeal, it will not be analysed here. It is also, in contrast to Szapocznikow's work, very well known, and has been extensively studied and interpreted on the international arena.

It should be noted, however, that, like Szapocznikow, Abramović also explored the issues of culture, identity and representation of the body within the territory defined by aesthetics. In 1975 Abramović performed *Art must be Beautiful; Artist must be Beautiful*, a piece in which she aggressively combed

180. Marina Abramović,  
Art must be  
Beautiful;  
Artist must be  
Beautiful, 1975.



her hair holding a metal brush in one hand and a metal comb in the other, repeating this for an hour (illus. 180). The aggressive character of the action performed in the name of 'beauty' resulted in actual physical pain and an overall visual effect contrary to the one normally achieved through conventional brushing. This performance had, therefore, a completely different character than Ivezović's or Natalia L. L.'s works, which played with the conventions of consumer culture. Here the reference of the performance was provided by the physical experience of the limits of the body's endurance when subjected to the process of 'beautification'. The themes of the physical experience, of subjecting the body to various tests of a quasi-ritual character with the aim of reaching an existential dimension of bodily self-knowledge, constituted a key element of Abramović's work.

Ritualization of such activities was intended to purify and, therefore, to reach the essential character of the experience of reality. In the artist's first,

unrealized, performance, *Come to Wash with Me*, rejected by the Belgrade Galerija Doma Omladine in 1969, Abramović proposed a literal form of purification consisting of washing. Members of the public were supposed to bring their dirty clothes and underwear to the performance, and the artist was supposed to wash. Pejić writes that an interesting aspect of the idea involved the artist's memory of her mother buying a washer, and the fact of the increasingly widespread usage of chemical detergents, which attested to Yugoslavia's progressive development into a 'civilized' country.<sup>27</sup> This unrealized performance combined motives related to various orders of signification: contextual, social, political (when considered from the perspective of Yugoslavia's rivalry with the Soviet Bloc countries within the sphere of economic and 'civilizational' development), related to women's issues (washing constituted a typically 'female' activity, connected with the home, the private sphere, and, therefore, the role assigned to women by tradition) and the theme of purification (transition from one sphere to another, of purifying-existential salvation ritual). Abramović's performance *Rhythm 5* (1974) also explored self-purification. The artist lit a fire in the shape of a star, cut and burned in it her hair and finger- and toenails, and then lay down in the middle of the starry flame.

However, on the most fundamental level, Abramović's performances involve the issue of bodily experience and of searching for the limits of its endurance. One of her most complex works dealing with those issues was



181. Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 5*, 1974.

*Rhythm 0* (illus. 181). For the performance, the gallery was filled with over 70 objects that were supposed to be used (and were used) by the members of the audience to perform any actions they chose on the artist's body. The body was presented to the public as just another object, with which anyone who visited the gallery could do as he or she pleased. The powerless body experienced everything that the members of the audience desired. The artist, deprived of her will, was radically reified. The relationship between her and the audience was, however, rather complicated. The viewers saw the situation; she saw that she was seen. At the same time, she experienced bodily reification, something that the members of the audience themselves could not experience, only imagine.

The problematic of bodily experience and visual perception, or rather the insufficiency of the merely visual experience in the context of the fully embodied one, appeared as a key motif of the artist's work. Pejić posed a rhetorical question: can a viewer perceive pain that is experienced?<sup>28</sup> In the work *Rhythm 4* (illus. 182), the artist subjected her naked body to a powerful wind machine until she lost consciousness. The audience, viewing the performance on television monitors located in another room, could not in any way share her experience or even imagine it, since the monitors showed only the artist's face. They could not even see what caused her to lose consciousness. The link between visual perception and experience was radically broken. But even in those instances when the members of audience were completely aware of the events taking place in front of their eyes, they could not accurately evaluate the artist's experience. This was the case in works in which Abramović experimented with medication (*Rhythm 2*, 1974), temperature (*Warm-Cold*, 1975) or different types of physical pain, as in the performance *Thomas Lips* (1975), during which the artist consumed a kilogram of honey, drank a litre of wine and then mutilated her body (she carved a five-pointed star on her abdomen, flagellated herself until she stopped feeling pain, and finally, lay on ice blocks under a strong heating lamp that intensified her bleeding). Her series of performances *Freeing* (*Freeing the Voice*, *Freeing the Memory*, *Freeing the Body*, 1975) addressed similar issues.

Abramović's art is situated on the opposite side of the spectrum from that of Szapocznikow, who did not seek pain, but nevertheless experienced it. While the Polish artist attempted to capture her body's experience in formal terms, to give it an aesthetic dimension, Abramović moved in the opposite direction. She rejected form in favour of direct experience, representation in favour of presentation, and generally challenged the usefulness of visual perception as a tool of understanding, opting instead for direct, physical, bodily experience. While Szapocznikow sought identity through art, art culture and

her profession as a sculptor, Abramović used a ritual to reach the existential dimension of her embodied existence. The two artists agreed, however, that the body constituted the only medium that allowed for such self-knowledge – or, to be more precise, that allowed women to achieve such self-knowledge. Szapocznikow and Abramović constitute the two poles of East European – or simply European – female body art, two sides of the process involved in women's search for identity through the body, two different strategies of its construction. Those strategies were as different as their art.

Male body art, or body art produced by men, functioned during the 1970s within different frames of reference. As the exhibition *Body and the East* persuasively demonstrated, this type of work found many enthusiasts in Eastern Europe.<sup>29</sup> One could cite here a long list of examples. The majority of artists addressed the issue of the body's physical and psychological condition and the limits of its endurance when exposed to various external factors. In general, the body was defined in those works according to individual (my body)

182. Marina Abramović,  
*Rhythm 4*, 1974.

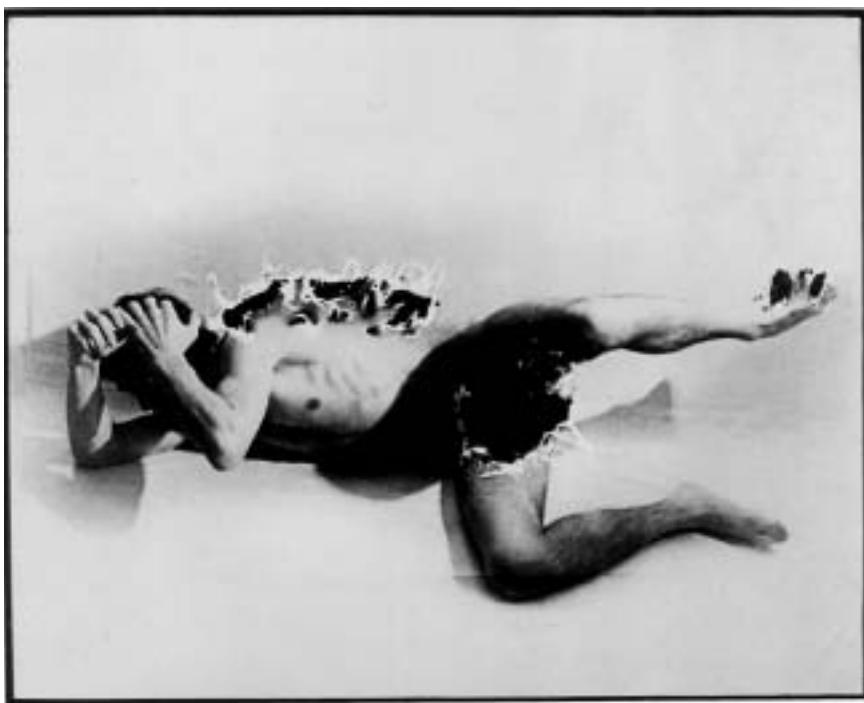
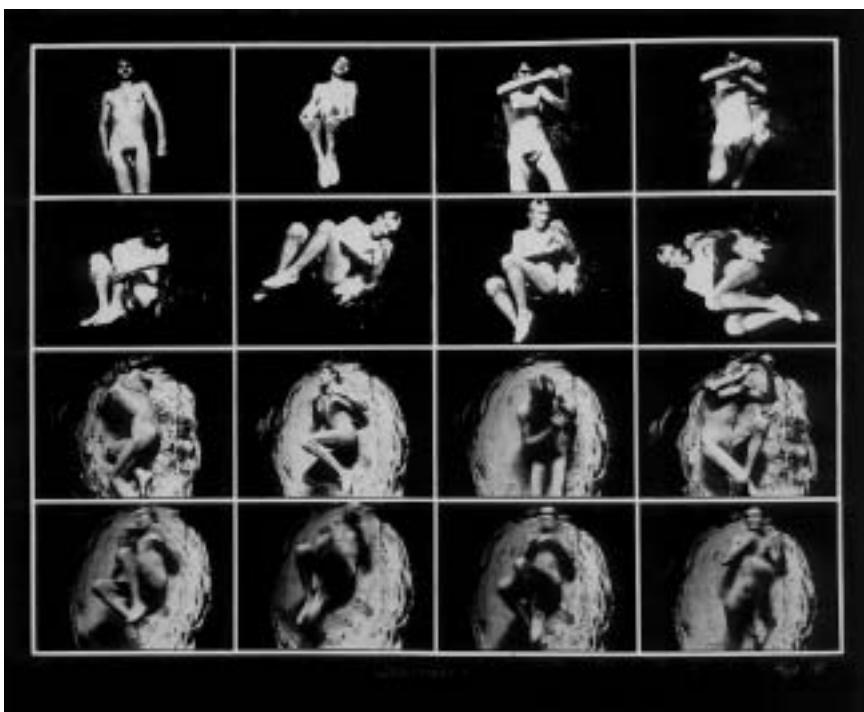


as well as universal (human body) categories. Sometimes it was instrumentalized and treated as a foil (a quasi-transparent surface) to the presumed interior depth of the artist, which had to be penetrated. Those types of projects tended to confirm the traditional dualism of the body and the soul without questioning its hierarchical assumptions. Self-knowledge of the body was supposed to lead to general conclusions concerning the body as such (conceived within that dualistic tradition), and the general human condition. The process of coming to bodily and psychological self-knowledge often occurred through action which took the form of a happening or performance, something that could be easily inscribed within the traditional male role of the active subject.

Paradoxically, the issue of the gendered definition of the male body was rarely raised, and the works tended to accept – rather than question – the traditional parameters of male sexuality. In many projects, the male body simply confirmed the functions assigned to it by tradition. It did not become an instrument of critique. At most, it challenged social norms of behaviour but did not question the philosophical foundations of traditional identity politics. Of course, there were departures from the norm. But the most interesting meaning that appeared in this context related to the political dimension of male body art. Any process that led to self-knowledge and questioning of conventions and that breached official ideological indoctrination and challenged accepted morality, in particular in those countries where the scope of tolerance was minimized or entirely eliminated, acquired political significance and as such deserves careful analysis.

According to László Beke, the work of Hungarian performance artist Tibor Hajas marks a break in the history of that country's performance art.<sup>30</sup> Hajas used photography not only to document his projects, but also and above all as the source of his performance ideas.<sup>31</sup> The artist's photographic documentation often functioned as the medium for his body-based work, including his work with the represented body. Hajas, who experimented in his performances with the extreme conditions to which the body could be subjected, also subjected the representation of the body (the photographs of his performances) to further extreme testing (illus. 183, 184). He burned the photographs, painted and drew over them, creating a type of a simulated body, since it was not the body itself that was subjected in those works to radical interventions, but its representation. The questions raised by those works have to do with the status of the body in culture, or the primacy of representation vis-à-vis reality. The forces acting on the (represented) body were real; they verified the realness of the representation. The physical limits of the represented body were tested, and the actions performed in reality functioned as the source of the photographic representation. This reversal of the normal representation/reality

183. Tibor Hajas, *Body Painting III*, 1978.



184. Tibor Hajas, *Surface Torture III*, 1978.

185. Volker Via  
Lewandowsky,  
*German  
Precision*, 1989.



order provided an opportunity for a discussion of the body/identity order. It raised the issue of the plane of our identification and as such recalled the dynamics of the Lacanian 'mirror stage'.<sup>32</sup> According to Lacan, the subject, searching for his identity, identifies with his reflection, or the way in which he is represented. Reality is verified on a symbolic level of representation, language, or – more broadly – culture. But Hajas is not only interested in representation, but also in the experience of the body, whose limits of 'endurance' are tested not within the sphere of the real, but the represented.

One should also note here a group of East German artists affiliated with the Dresden art academy, who in 1987 (the date of their collaboration on the project *Herz-Horn-Haut-Schrein*) took on the name Autoperforationsartistik.<sup>33</sup> The name came from the term 'self-piercing', which identified the strategy of art practice based on various forms of puncturing, perforation and piercing of one's own body. This strategy had a clear psychological motivation and was more concerned with psychological conditions than physical experiences. Else Gabriel (the only woman in this four-member collective) wrote: 'I developed weapons necessary in the daily struggle. For instance self-perforation, making



186. Micha Brendel, *Der Mutterseelenalleinering*, 1989.

of holes in the self, helped to neutralize [an] excess of feelings by experiencing good and bad emotions as a result of the movement of a sharp object'.<sup>34</sup> When one takes into consideration the collective presentation by the members of the group, Reiner Görß, Via Lewandowsky (illus. 185), Micha Brendel (illus. 186) and Else Gabriel, it becomes apparent that examination of the body's physical limits are situated at the heart of the issues explored by the group. By experimenting with pain, with the possibilities of exhibiting the maltreated body subjected to various physical tests, by using shock as a technique of interaction with the audience, by transgressing the limits of the viewers' endurance and habits of reception, the artists were seeking (in accordance with the general tendency of this type of art defined during a much earlier period) the psychological limits of the body. The literature sometimes compares those young Dresden artists with the Viennese actionists and their Orgiastic Mysteries Theatre, though such comparisons, as Durs Grünbein has noted, appear rather imprecise. The Viennese artists functioned within the field defined by Catholic traditions and were closer to mysticism, aesthetization of a uniquely conceived liturgy and the metaphoric conception of the orgy. In contrast, the German artists were much closer to the 'Protestant rituals' within which self-mutilation functions as a guarantee of the created order.<sup>35</sup>

As I have noted earlier, the problem posed by the German artists relates as much to physical as to psychological experience and is connected with a



187. Jan Mlčoch,  
*Suspension*,  
1974. The  
National  
Gallery, Prague.

desire to release suppressed feelings, to breach the blockade imposed on emotional experience and communication through dramatic bodily experience. Eckhart Gillen argued that such suppression of emotions, identified by Hans-Joachim Maaz as *Gefühlsstau* (emotional blockage), is connected with ‘the fear of Germans’, especially in post-war East Germany.<sup>36</sup> The GDR, unlike West Germany, did not undergo a process of de-Nazification and, unlike its Western neighbour, did not accept its responsibility for the Holocaust and World War II. On the contrary, relying on the anti-fascists’ rhetoric, the state suppressed any desire for discussion or acceptance of responsibility for the past on the level of the official discourse, a strategy aimed at cleansing the collective memory. This type of complex, connected with the repressive character of the political system in the GDR, which continued the old fascist structures of organization and control of social life, led to a blockage of expression identified by Maaz. Everyone was aware of the German past as well as the character of the current East German Communist regime, or at least was able to be aware given minimal intelligence and imagination, but, due to the potential consequences of the expression of such thoughts and feelings, kept them suppressed. This was the main cause of the emotional blockage that could be released only through strong intervention, a certain type of shock that could breach the blockade imposed on emotional expression and interpersonal communication. This function was supposed to be performed by self-piercing and self-perforation, practices that



188. Jan Mlčoch,  
20 Minutes,  
1975. The  
National  
Gallery, Prague.

led to the rejection of discipline and masks and to the revealing of fear and loathing, and consequently to the opening and unblocking of the psyche.

A different type of problematic, explored much earlier, in a much less drastic, and at the same time much less exhibitionist, manner appeared among the Czech body artists working in the 1970s: Jan Mlčoch, Karel Miler and Petr Štembera.<sup>37</sup> Due to the particularly difficult political situation in Czechoslovakia after the suppression of the Prague Spring, especially a series of repressive measures aimed at Czechoslovak society, in particular its cultural workers, happening and performance art had a special significance here. Jiří Valoch wrote that 'Czech and Slovak 1970s performance art was free during the time of unfreedom.'<sup>38</sup> The first of the artists he mentioned, Jan Mlčoch, in a performance entitled *Suspension* (illus. 187), remained suspended for several hours from rafters in an attic of one of the Prague houses. His ears were sealed with wax and his eyes were bound with a black strip of cloth. During the



189. Petr Štembera,  
Tom Marioni,  
*Connection*,  
1975.

performance, his body was supposed to experience its own weight. The elimination of other sense information enhanced this experience, and even, to a certain extent, rendered it absolute. In another performance, *20 Minutes* (illus. 188), the artist sat on the ground, pressed to the wall by a long pole with a sharp knife attached to its end. His assistant was instructed to respond to any sign of the artist's waning concentration by pressing the pole against the artist's body to the extent necessary (even by cutting him) to restore his intense concentration. The performance, based on maximum concentration, was supposed to last 20 minutes; however, due to the malfunction of the alarm clock (a detail that adds a certain Eastern European flavour to the piece), it lasted 44 minutes.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast, Karel Miler performed rather simple actions, such as jumping up and down (*Closer to the Clouds*, 1977) thereby 'measuring' in this peculiarly ironic way the endurance of his body.<sup>40</sup> Petr Štembera, the best



190. Petr Štembera,  
*Grafting*, 1975.

191. Petr Štembera,  
LAICA  
*Performance*,  
1978.



known of the Czech body artists, often attempted to define the body's boundaries through contact with the outside, with the body of another human being (for instance in the performance *Connection*, 1975, created with Tom Marioni; illus. 189), or with nature (for instance, emulating the practice of grafting of different plants in the performance *Grafting* (illus. 190). The best known of Štembera's performances are the artist's various attempts to test the endurance of his body: jumping through fire blindfolded (1975), crawling through glass (1977), crawling through patches of earth mixed with acidic substances (1978), experiment with candles, a 500-watt light fixture and a burning rope in hands and mouth (*LAICA Performance*, 1978) ('LAICA' stands for Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art) (illus. 191). In Bratislava, Štembera created a performance during which the naked artist lay, or rather was wedged, under a table on which an aquarium with a fish was placed. The artist crawled on the floor, dragging the table with the aquarium, pretending to swim and risking that the fishbowl could at any moment fall on him (*Fish*, illus. 192). During a visit to Poland, in one of the Wrocław galleries, the naked artist wrapped himself in a heavy window drape and, lying on the floor, read out loud fragments from a book on Polish history with the aid of a flashlight, in particular those concerning the history of the nineteenth-century national uprisings (*Polish History*; illus. 193). Štembera read each fragment of the text

192. Petr Štembera, *Fish*, 1980.



for as long as his breath allowed. Simultaneously, at the opposite ends of the gallery, fully dressed Polish and Czech artists read fragments of newspaper reports on the contemporary political life in the two countries. The performance contrasted the language of the struggle for independence with the dry language of the Communist press, the naked body of the artist speaking ‘the truth’ in an embodied form (the length of each read fragment was measured by the artist’s breath) with the clothed bodies, hiding ‘the truth’ under the clothing/language of party propaganda. Hiding his naked body in drapery was supposed to symbolize a shelter, or a political underground, which was beginning to function during this period in Poland.<sup>41</sup>

In one of the interviews the artist revealed the sources of his inspiration, namely existentialism and Zen Buddhism. He emphasized, however, that the local circumstances – in particular the situation in Czechoslovakia, which resulted from the armed intervention of the Warsaw Pact troops – provided a very important frame of reference for his work.<sup>42</sup> He wished to create a situation conducive to interpersonal communication at a time when normal social structures were being broken down by repressive measures. A work performed for a small, intimate audience of friends and acquaintances and disseminated through documentation served that function. According to the artist, the model for this type of work was provided by the older generation of

193. Petr Štembera,  
*Polish History*,  
1978.



performance artists active during the 1960s, such as Eugen Brikcius or Milan Knižak. However, the meaning of Štembera's performances, precisely because of this historic context, was much more politically charged. After the formation of Charter '77, his performances acquired even more political significance, which led the artist to abandon them and to explore 'a type of developed Zen'.

A very interesting strategy for using the body was employed by a Croatian artist, Tomislav Gotovac. In his best-known project, *Streaking*, performed in Belgrade in 1971 (illus. 194) and later in Zagreb in 1979 (illus. 195), the artist appeared naked on a busy city street. He interpreted this action as an expression of an intimate, almost loving, relationship with the city.<sup>43</sup> The artist was enamoured with the city's charm. His ideal city was New York, especially the Lower East Side and the East Village of Manhattan, which he saw as the essence of urbanity. Gotovac observed that the city was the subject of great art: James Joyce experienced Dublin and John Dos Passos New York, in particular Manhattan. The city was existence, the essence of reality.<sup>44</sup> This was the source of Gotovac's attachment to Zagreb, as well as his intimate, bodily relationship with the city. His nakedness intensified this relationship and revealed, according to the artist, the essence of being. A man was born naked and by exposing his nakedness he disclosed himself. By taking off his clothing, he revealed himself, a state that enhanced his relationship with reality.

Naturally, those few examples are not intended to provide a complete list



194. Tomislav Gotovac,  
*Streaking*,  
Belgrade, 1971.

195. Tomislav Gotovac,  
*Action '100'*,  
Trg Republike,  
Zagreb, 1979.

of the male artists who practised body art in Eastern Europe. Rather, I have used them to identify certain general attitudes within the region's body art, which focused on a particular understanding of the ontological character of the body formed around general, universal categories, even in a situation when the artist subjected his *individual* body to a risk or violence. One could say that, in general, male body art tended to desexualize the body, to marginalize or eliminate gender. The exhibition and the use of the male body was therefore connected during the 1970s and '80s with completely different meanings from the exhibition and use of the female body, since the latter was consistently subjected to a strong influence of heterosexual eroticism grounded in the dominant male gaze, which in turn linked the male gaze with male desire and pleasure. Early psychoanalytic studies applied to visual culture subjected those issues to an extensive and probing analysis. Unlike the female body, the male body was never objectified from the perspective of the external viewing. It was always treated as a subject. The male body in classic European culture has been connected with the representation of power and heroism, concepts identified with active, rather than passive, being. It is, therefore, more closely associated with action than exhibition. This relationship was interrupted by medieval Christian culture (based in Judaism), which, according to Mario Perniola, associated nakedness of the body (not only of the male body) with humiliation, degradation and denial of dignity or of the possibility of action. When that tradition was rejected during the post-Renaissance period and new links were forged with the classical tradition, the female body became the *topos* of pleasure and passivity and male body of power and action.<sup>45</sup>

Deeper changes in the contemporary significance of the male body could be observed only with the appearance of the neo-avant-garde and gay subculture. Such artists as Robert Morris (for instance in *Waterman Switch*, 1965), Robert Mapplethorpe (in *x Portfolio*, 1977–8) or Andy Warhol (especially in his films produced during the Factory period and in the photographic documentation of that environment) reversed the relationship developed within the European tradition between the gaze, desire and pleasure, exchanging the female body in this relationship with the male. Those processes occurred within the already prepared ground of the gay subculture of the interwar period and in the context of the post-war sexual revolution.

Eastern Europe did not experience such a revolution. Here, when the male body appeared within the context of visual culture, it did so – especially during the 1950s – as a representation of heroism within Socialist Realism. It was rarely completely nude: the sex organs were generally obscured by various means. If the conservative and prudish society of this part of the continent allowed nudity, it preferred to deal with it from the male perspective of strictly

heterosexual voyeurism, rather than to seek radical models for overturning of gender roles. The exception to this case was the GDR, where nudism was relatively widespread and broadly accepted.

When the East European male viewer saw the naked female body, sometimes presented in photographs, film or happenings, he reacted with a degree of excitement. And he was not alone. His Western European counterparts often responded in a similar way. According to Amelia Jones, the postmodern rhetoric of the identity of the female body very easily slipped into traditional, phallocentric modes of viewing that were dominated by the culture of the male gaze. According to Jones, this problem effectively prevented the understanding of body art conceived within the context of feminist identity politics. This was one of the reasons why feminism of the 1980s rejected body art as too risky. It was simply too easily compromised by the omnipresent male gaze. However, Jones's critique is not directed against that heterosexual, male viewer, who (in this case) remains rather indifferent, but rather against the naïveté of feminism, which too easily succumbed to the formations it aimed to reject and which approached body art too cautiously, given its true revolutionary potential. Body art offered grounds for the radical questioning of the Cartesian conception of subjectivity and for the taking up of a radical critique of the subject-body relationship, a strategy that deconstructed the metaphysical objectification of the (female) body.<sup>46</sup>

In East European countries, where feminist theory and the politics of gender identity developed slowly (if at all) under Communist rule, this type of practice was particularly threatened by the danger of phallocentric reassimilation. The work of Natalia L. L., which can be read according to feminist categories but which was framed by the artist within a Modernist or even formalist discourse, offers a good example of this tension. The ideological and critical dimension of her work, considered within the context of the masculine culture of male and female representation, is certainly revolutionary. Paradoxically, the work was accompanied by theoretical statements published by the artist, which focused on the morphological character of the photographic image and the tautological conception of art.<sup>47</sup> Those statements did not mention the gendered definition of visuality or any revision of the codes of female representation. In fact, the artist did not mention the issue of gender at all. Instead, she focuses on the discursive character of conceptual art practice, in particular those forms of conceptualism that could be inscribed within the formalist tradition of Modernism that was particularly strong in Eastern Europe.

This tension has a much broader resonance than the history of Polish culture: it affects the art of the whole of Eastern Europe. The paradoxical linking of artistic forms inherently critical of Modernist practice with the values

of the supposedly critical Modernism, such as the autonomy of the work, formalism, irreducibility of aesthetics, the apolitical character of art, purity and independence of the creative act and so on, throw suspicion on the depth of the reception of postmodern critical practice in this part of Europe. On the other hand, they pose an interesting challenge for historians, who are forced to question the usefulness and suitability of the theoretical and methodological instruments developed in the West. Postmodern artistic formulas, including those of the neo-avant-garde, are not necessarily synonymous in the East European context with a critique of the Modernist system of values. Sometimes they are even inscribed into its axiology. I mention this not to devalue this movement, but rather to describe and analyse it within its proper frames of historic reference. Simply put, the culture of this region is different and is governed by its own rules.

The difference between male and female body art, irrespective of on which side of the Iron Curtain it was produced, was based in the different points of departure and statuses of men and women in European culture. In a phallocentric culture that associates masculinity with action, the male body was an active and acting body that created situations. In contrast, according to Jones (citing Craig Owens), women's body art tended to present the female body according to the rhetoric of the pose. Such a presentation had a passive character within the system of the assigned social gender roles and meanings that were externally conferred. In other words, the meaning of the male body was created immediately, in the moment of its action, while that of the female body was deferred and mediated by the images produced by the masculine culture that defined woman's existence in reference to the desire of the 'other'. This was the main source of the difference in the strategies as well as the meanings of body art practised by male and female artists.<sup>48</sup>

To return to the theme of the male body, as I mentioned earlier, there were many male artists in Eastern Europe who used the body in their art. However, the number of artists who used their gender as a means of communication, or who 'gendered' their body through art practice that assigned particular gender-specific meanings, was much smaller. I will mention only two very different artists who used quite different strategies, references and ideologies. One of them is the Polish artist Jerzy Bereś, the other the Romanian artist Ion Grigorescu.

I will begin with a brief description of several of Bereś's performances.<sup>49</sup> Bereś was a political artist *par excellence*. His work always had politics as its main reference. He was interested in creating a confrontation with specific political forces, or – more precisely – with their language. He provided an interesting commentary on political language (or rather, quasi-political

language) by creating various objects whose meaning was contained by the tension existing between visuality and discourse. Their full significance is apparent only locally, in Poland, because they refer to idiomatic expressions, ordinary words to which Poles assigned specific meanings that provided an ironic comment on the political situation. For instance in *Clapper* (1970), a series of wooden hands could be simultaneously (as if by a command) put into motion to emulate applause. In *Rag* (1971), the artist attached a rectangular piece of cloth with the word 'szmata' (rag) to one part of a pivoted lever and a wooden hand, ready for a handshake, to the other. The act of shaking the hand caused the movement of the cloth. In *Desk* (1970), Bereś attached a desk surface to pivoted legs that could be spread apart. The spreading of the legs allowed one to use a stamp attached by a short rope at the 'groin' area. All these object-commentaries were situated within the reality of the early 1970s, when a



196. Jerzy  
Bereś,  
*Prophesy II*  
*Fulfilled,*  
Cieszyn, 1989.

significant part of Polish society, including the Polish intelligentsia, came under the influence of the demagoguery of the new First Secretary of the Polish Communist Party, Edward Gierek, who promised Socialism with ‘a new face’.

Bereś’s performances/installations *Prophesy I* (Foksal Gallery, 1968), *Prophesy II* (Kraków, 1968–88, performed several times), and final *Prophesy II Fulfilled* (Cieszyn, 1989; illus. 196) marked very significant points in Polish male body art. In *Prophesy I*, the artist dragged a tree taken down in the nearby park into the gallery with the audience’s help. Then, dressed in white and red canvas (the colours of the Polish flag), he installed ‘the work’, topped with a bow made with white and red string (fashioned from his own ‘clothing’). *Prophesy II* was created in response to the severe censorship of the press during the tense political situation at the beginning of March 1968, when the Communist regime engaged in a brutal anti-Semitic campaign to which Polish students responded by staging dramatic protests. Bereś’s performance was, to a certain extent, provoked by the editor of the influential Warsaw-based weekly *Kultura* (Culture), who wrote an arrogant and ignorant column critical of modern culture under the pseudonym Hamilton. At the Kraków Krzysztofory gallery, the artist installed a cart filled with firewood. Once again wrapped in white and red cloth, he and members of the audience started several fires using issues of *Kultura*. After a while, he climbed on top of a large pile of wood, and once again made a bow with white and red string. He then asked a member of the audience for a piece of burning wood, blew out the flame and signed his ‘work’ with the charred stick.

The last ‘prophesy’ was performed during an equally charged historic moment, the day after the signing of the so-called Round Table agreement, which ended the political monopoly of the Communist Party in Poland (April 1989). Bereś repeated the familiar elements of *Prophesy II*, but ended the performance by writing on his own body ‘it [the prophesy] was fulfilled’ and making the final white and red point or period on his penis. In another simple but highly effective performance created in London in 1988, *Image from Poland*, the artist painted red stripes resembling whipping marks on his back. On his torso he painted a white question mark, with the white and red stop or period painted on his penis, which raised the question of the sense of suffering and sacrifice that Poland suffered, according to the artist, in the name of freedom or independence lost under the Soviet domination in the aftermath of World War II.

In both *Prophecies* and *Image from Poland*, the artist defined himself, his body, as a ‘monument’. This motif was even more apparent in his performance, *Artist’s Monument* (Warcino–Kępice, 1978; illus. 197). In the performance, Bereś

197. Jerzy  
Bereś,  
Artist's  
Monument,  
Warcino-  
Kępice, 1978.



was dressed in a loincloth made from wood (a *perizonium* identified with the crucified Christ), on which he wrote the words 'ciało artysty' (the artist's body). On his shoulder he carried a flag, on which one could see the words 'duch artysty' (the artist's spirit). Dragging an oval tree stump with the words 'pomnik artysty' (the artist's monument) as if it were a wheelbarrow, Bereś walked several kilometres from the town of Warcino to the town of Kępice in the north of Poland. When he arrived, the artist marked a circle with his feet dipped in white paint. He set his 'wheelbarrow' in the middle, burned his *perizonium* (the artist's body) on it, and dressed himself in the cloth previously functioning as the flag (the artist's spirit).

It is worth noting that in every performance (not only those mentioned here), the artist appearing in the nude addressed two different areas: the widely conceived political, or rather historic, local, Polish reality and the issue of the role and status of the artist entangled in history, responsible for shaping the reality, past and especially future, in other words, of the artist as prophet. The national elements which appear in the artist's work (in particular, the colours of the national flag) speak eloquently of his engagement with the country's history. Their link to the role of the artist as the one who knows the true sense of history and who understands the sacrifices made in the name of future salvation (the return of independence) is based in references to the tradition of Polish Romanticism. In the nineteenth century, when Poland was partitioned among the three neighbouring empires, Germany, Austria and Russia, it was the artist (often the national poet, but not exclusively so) who gave (or

discovered) the meaning of history, and who prophesied that the sacrifices made by the nation would eventually lead to salvation, in the same way that Christ's sacrifice brought salvation to humanity.

Bereš made self-conscious references to those grand narratives of Polish culture, using their authority in his confrontation with the illicit power of the Communist regime. The artist's naked body functions in this context as the bearer of the authority invested in the artist not only by the metaphysically conceived history ending in salvation, but also positively (rather than critically) invoked phallocentrism of the European culture. The artist's penis, on which he painted the white and red point, functions in this context as a phallus, the symbol of the artist's authority as genius, national bard and prophet, but also of the culture's authority. Hence, the power and historic legitimacy of the opposition against the Communist regime is based in the authority of culture. The body becomes the means of expression and the territory for the created ideology; as such, it becomes, paradoxically, 'disembodied'. As a symbol of authority, it is also (as in the mystical Christian tradition) the expression of the 'spirit' or 'the soul'. It must be humiliated and destroyed so that the 'spirit' can be reborn (as in *Artist's Monument*). The exhibition of the genitalia has here exclusively symbolic significance; it marks the phallus, the sign of the authority and spiritual power, sanctioned by tradition and history. That authority is opposed to the material and illegitimate authority of the Communists.



198. Ion  
Grigorescu,  
*Delivery*, 1977.

The work of Ion Grigorescu, identified by Ileana Pintilie as one of the members of the Romanian ‘post-happening generation’, an artist who preferred to use photography and film rather than ‘live’ performance, is based on very different assumptions.<sup>50</sup> Grigorescu is one of the most interesting members of the Romanian neo-avant-garde. He began by painting conventional canvases and producing equally conventional prints. However, he rapidly broadened his inventory of media, reaching for photography and film and creating para- or rather quasi-documentaries, such as *Election Rally* (1975), which commented on the Ceauşescu dictatorship. I would like to mention in particular two interrelated works, a film produced in 1976 entitled *Masculine/Feminine*, which analysed the idea of gender identity presented in popular movies, and a series of photographs, *Delivery* (illus. 198, 199).

In both of those works, the artist photographed and filmed his genitalia in a way that transgressed male gender identity. He photographed his body in positions that referenced the birthing process. He also supplied it with female attributes such as ovaries and a folded placenta. The feminized male body was opened to experiences that were biologically inaccessible to it and, simultaneously, by inscribing itself into the role of a female body, it defined gender differences in cultural rather than biological categories. If, as Amelia Jones has noted, the male body was in the European cultural tradition fulfilled in action and the female body took on the poses assigned to it by the phallocentric



199. Ion  
Grigorescu,  
*Delivery*, 1977.

culture, then the strategy of the Romanian artist could be seen in terms of such ‘posing’, or acceptance of the poses assigned traditionally to women. This claim can be made not only in reference to ‘natural’ female attributes (ovaries or placenta), or her ‘natural’ function (pregnancy and birth), but also her behaviour in front of the camera. The artist took on poses traditionally associated with the female body. Grigorescu’s radically anti-masculine presentation reveals the conventional character of the gender roles and therefore of the authority. The phallus, the symbol of power, is here degraded; its role appears to be contingent and unstable. The authority is revealed not as a stable function but as a conventional one. This destabilization of gender difference is fundamentally subversive in character; by revealing the conventional character of the legitimacy of any power, it suggests the possibility of its overturn.

The historic context of Grigorescu’s work is particularly important for understanding its significance. After a short period of liberalization in the second half of the 1960s, the early ’70s were marked in Romania by renewed efforts to impose strict controls over the population’s social lives. The system of police control was accompanied by one that enforced a prudish moral code, which stabilized sexual behaviour and was, generally, observed by the local population. Considered in this context, Grigorescu’s work revealing and exploring gender, its function and significance (more as a contingent rather than stable social order) acquires a decidedly political character. The artist’s effort to blur the boundaries between phallic and vaginal representation questioned the very basis of social order. It undermined not only the phallocentric legitimacy of authority, but also the stability of the construction of subjectivity. According to those terms, the subject is not given or defined *a priori* by a metaphysical dictum, but rather negotiated from the perspective of meanings assigned to gender by various forms of social practice, including those forms involved in the visualization of gender. The stable Cartesian *cogito* is replaced by a dynamic construction that acquires its meanings through persistent, endless confrontation.

In the traditional system, gender identity is permanent and unchanging. It is determined by the biological function of the body. The difference in biology defines the gender difference, or, more precisely, its hierarchical character. Within the new way of understanding gender, this naturalistic determinism is undermined and gender difference is defined on the level of culture. Jacqueline Rose, commenting on Lacan, observed that anatomical differences are not gender differences but rather gender ‘forms’ that allow the gender difference to come into being through language and, therefore, culture.<sup>51</sup> Hence, gender difference has a symbolic, cultural character, rather than a biological or natural

one. This understanding of gender challenges the stability, inevitability and finality of the subject-construction, opening the way for undermining traditional gender roles as well as gender hierarchies.<sup>52</sup>

Identity politics formulated by various subgroups, including feminists, have explored this opportunity, creating critical tools for the analysis of authoritarian social and political structures. Grigorescu inscribed himself into this movement and, because he had to operate within the context of a totalitarian regime, his art had particularly subversive and critical implications. Any authority system, including the totalitarian system that is its extreme version, can function safely only under conditions that ensure stability of the hierarchically defined social structures based in phallocentrism. That is one reason why the policies of the Stalinist and post-Stalinist regimes were so anti-women, even though they were often masked by such cosmetic measures as the founding of women's organizations (official and controlled by the Central Committee of the Communist Party), or even by appointing women to leadership positions within party and state organizations. Paradoxically, the Communists were aided by the traditional conservatism of the societies they ruled. I say paradoxically, because at first glance one would assume that tradition would have been a natural antidote for the 'proletarian revolution'. However, if one examines the actual function of those societies more closely, going beyond the class struggle, the replacement of market mechanisms by economic plans or the transition from democratic to Soviet institutions, it is quite clear that conservative models of social behaviour, among them those governing gender, helped to ensure the stability of the regime. Therefore a challenge posed to those principles also posed a challenge to the totalitarian regime.

The problem posed by Grigorescu's art is that his work did not have a public character. It not only did not explore the issue of the body's presence in the public space, but the artist's work had an essentially private character. Illeana Pintilie writes that Grigorescu created his own theatre, in which he was the actor, the director and the audience. His work did not have any other audience. It was created in the privacy of the artist's own apartment and focused on prosaic activities. Be that as it may, Pintilie notes that his pieces *Masculine/Feminine* and *Delivery* touched forbidden territory, a body that was a taboo subject for the Romanian society of that period.<sup>53</sup> When considered from the perspective of the artist's decision to produce the work, rather than the reception of his work, Grigorescu's photography and films have to be seen as having a subversive character, especially because they questioned traditional gender differences.

Bereş and Grigorescu adopted different strategies for opposing the regime. My decision to discuss and compare them here is intended to demonstrate the

range of the male body art practice and theory and to suggest some questions regarding its critical function. Although it is clear that using the male body and exposing male genitalia in this type of work, carried out within the context of a heterosexual and homophobic society, had subversive meanings, the broader social impact of this work was rather modest. It is worth stressing that even though the work may have had such meanings, it did not necessarily have a real political function. On that level the similarities between the work of the Polish and the Romanian artist end. While the former invoked tradition, the grand narrative of the Polish culture inherited from Romanticism as the authority of his opposition strategy, the latter chose to question the traditional gender identities situated at the core of the society's functioning, suggesting that destabilization of those identities posed a radical challenge to the system of power. Bereś opposed the totalitarian regime with the authority of the tradition. In other words, he opposed one authority with another, one hierarchy with another. In contrast, Grigorescu rejected the principle of authority based in hierarchy in his critical method: he rejected hierarchy as such. Because hierarchy is the base of any power system, the Romanian artist in effect rejected the very principle of power, confronting it with his own critical practice, which destabilized the basis in which that power was grounded.

Both Bereś's *Prophecy* and Grigorescu's *Delivery* have a historic character. They were created in a particular place at a particular time and they defined their own position in reference to that location. Bereś's art referenced the issue of national identity. It invoked the grand narratives of Polish culture and the Romantic myths of the artist-bard and of national destiny. The Polish artist builds the politics of identity based in a defined authority. He does not question that authority, or engage in a critical discourse on tradition. Just the opposite: he seeks within it the strength to oppose the Communist reality. But such recourse to the authority of the nation raises the spectre of national mystification, which is the foundation of the nationalist ideology. Of course nationalisms can be more or less insular, to a greater or lesser extent defensive, surrounded by walls behind which everything that is different and 'other' is kept at a safe distance. It can lead, naturally, to ethnic fundamentalism. I do not intend to suggest that Bereś's body art slides into the sphere of such nationalism. However, it is important to point out the danger inherent in his strategy, which, in name of a noble cause, invokes the authority of a national tradition. This danger threatens in particular those strategies that do not have a critical relationship to that tradition.

Grigorescu's art, which explores the politics of identity through the deconstruction of gender, faces other threats. Clearly, the definition of the subject has here a dynamic and – most importantly – critical character. Similarly, the

destabilization of authority appears to safeguard the work against ideological co-option. The danger that can be found in the context of such a strategy has to do, paradoxically, with such dislocation. It is the danger of creating a statement that does not belong to anyone because it is not localized, or rather, it is located beyond any one place or space, and as such can be manipulated by the system of power. On the most basic level, the danger comes from the absence of the geo-political perspective. The Romanian artist forms the meaning for his art somehow in reference to a specific context, but, in reality, he is mainly interested in the universal method for the deconstruction of the language of gender. Unlike critiques emerging from within feminism, gay subcultures or ethnic diasporas, which negotiate identity politics through deconstruction of patriarchal, heterosexual and imperial subjectivity, Grigorescu avoids such contextual declarations. Unlike artists who define the exact location from which they speak and values in whose name they make statements, Grigorescu does not formulate a clear identity politics based in a particular location. He creates a critical method for identity politics rather than politics as such. The artist's position has a general and universal character, which acquires concrete historic significance only after it is contextualized and framed by art-historic research. Paradoxically, the artist inscribes himself into a Modernist discourse of the universal subject, and thereby provides evidence of the tendency typical for Eastern Europe, namely, that of linking postmodern critical methodology and visual forms with Modernist, universalizing values. Despite himself, he also reveals the source of this tension. In the West, where the system of power has a much more dispersed character, art has adopted a much more concretely political form. Its critical edge has been aimed in a particular direction, namely against the system of surveillance. In the countries of Eastern Europe, during the period when political authoritarianism was well defined and more interested in terror than surveillance, forms of strategic resistance took on a more generalized, universal character. Whereas liberal, dispersed power was opposed with a concrete political critique, totalitarian, focused power was opposed with a general and universal concept of resistance.



# Epilogue





# The Spectres Haunting Eastern Europe in the 1980s

In 1848 Karl Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, ‘A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism’. If he had been living 140 years later, he might have written that in the 1980s the spectre of the End of Communism had replaced it. Regardless of ongoing discussions about the possibility of the return to power of political parties linked to Communism or the current relevance of the ideas expressed in the *Communist Manifesto*,<sup>1</sup> the fact remains that the Eastern Bloc disintegrated at the end of the 1980s and Eastern Europe, ‘abducted’ in the mid-1940s by the Soviet Empire, according to Milan Kundera, finally regained its independence. This transition did not take place overnight. The shadow of Yalta lost its intensity very gradually. Slowly, over the course of the 1980s, many aspects of social, political and cultural life emerged from under that shadow. Clearly, the processes taking place within the Soviet Union during the 1980s, in particular *glasnost* and *perestroika*, introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev, contributed significantly to the disintegration of the entire bloc. New countries, remembering their own political ambitions, emerged out of the old empire along its Western border. The Soviet Union itself was outlived by several years by its own institutions, the Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, which were created originally to yoke the countries of Eastern Europe.

In different locations within Eastern Europe, those breakdown processes took different forms and had different timelines. In some countries, particularly Romania, the fall of the dictatorship was extremely bloody and was clearly at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Czechoslovak ‘velvet revolution’. The fall of the Communist regime in the GDR took place without bloodshed, but had a much more dramatic and spectacular character. A rapid sequence of events begun by the mass exodus of East Germans to West Germany, mainly through the former Eastern Bloc countries undergoing the process of liberation from under the control of Big Brother, ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the absorption of the GDR into West German structures.

The transition in Hungary had a very different course. There were no dramatic turns, demonstrations or confrontations with the police, or a bloody revolution like the one in Romania. The conversion from Communism to capitalism was rather uneventful. It was merely a transition from 'goulash Socialism', or a consumerist model of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', to a moderate form of market economy, created without such drastic measures as the 'shock therapy' implemented in the early 1990s in Poland by the Minister of Finance, Leszek Balcerowicz. The 1980s in Hungary were characterized by the slow coming together of the two systems and a gradual takeover of the centralized economic system by capitalist, free market forces.

The experiences of Poland and Yugoslavia were also very different. In the early 1980s the Yugoslav Federation went through a period of slow and gradual change. However, in the early 1990s, those changes began to accelerate and acquire a violent character, leading to brutal wars and ethnic cleansings in certain areas of the former federation. In contrast, the revolution in Poland, which began in the early 1980s with the founding of Solidarity, introduction of martial law and severe repression by police, culminated in 1989 in the election



200. Joseph  
Beuys, *Polen-  
transport '81*,  
1981, Muzeum  
Sztuki, Łódź.

of the first non-Communist head of state in the Eastern Bloc and a period of ‘shock’ economic reforms.

In contrast to other countries of Central Europe and Soviet Union, Poland experienced profound shifts on the political, psychological and cultural planes at the end of the 1970s and in the early ’80s. The formation of Solidarity was a great energizing force – and not only for Polish society. For instance, in the summer of 1981 Joseph Beuys appeared unannounced at Muzeum Sztuki (the Museum of Art) in Łódź, one of the oldest museums of modern art in the world. In recognition of the museum’s significance as well as the significance of the situation developing during this period in Poland, Beuys deposited a collection of approximately 700 objects and documents, referred to collectively as *Polentransport ’81*, with the museum (illus. 200).<sup>2</sup> Of course, this gesture had political implications, but it also stemmed from particular political convictions. The theory formulated by Beuys, which assumed global development along the so-called ‘third way’, constituted a critique of the Western capitalism and consumerism as well as Eastern European Communism. Beuys felt that the utopian integrated system, based on human solidarity, collective governance by owners and workers, ‘free industry’ and direct democracy, appeared to be realized in Poland under the auspices of Solidarity. The artist saw Poland as the cradle of a new world order, the beginning of the realization of the ‘third path’ utopia, and as such a birthplace of Eurasia.

Naturally, time adjusted those utopian expectations. Another artist, a Polish émigré living in the United States, Krzysztof Wodiczko, revealed more precisely the character of the occurring transformations in his work *Leninplatz-projection*, created in 1990 for the *Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit* project, organized in Berlin by DAAD (illus. 201). The artist projected an image of a Eastern tourist carrying a few ordinary consumer products onto a monument dedicated to Lenin located in East Berlin. This work addressed not only the issue of consumer demand for Western gadgets in the East, but also anticipated the course of the changes taking place. Those changes would move much more assuredly in the direction of capitalism than democracy, not to mention the ‘third way’.

A few years earlier, a group of Polish artists, Łódź Kaliska (Marek Janiak, Andrzej Kwietniewski, Adam Rzepecki and Andrzej Świątlik), addressed the issue of freedom in an equally ironic way. They attempted to realize the formula of the ‘third way’ by contesting the official art scene as well as the powerful structures of the unofficial, so-called independent art scene connected with the underground political opposition and the Catholic Church, which functioned as its protector. In a short film based on Eugène Delacroix’s painting *Liberty Leading the People*, the Łódź-based artists responded (in German): *Freiheit – nein danke* [Freedom – no, thank you].<sup>3</sup> This ironic project was aimed at

201. Krzysztof Wodiczko,  
*Leninplatz-projection*,  
1990. Berlin.



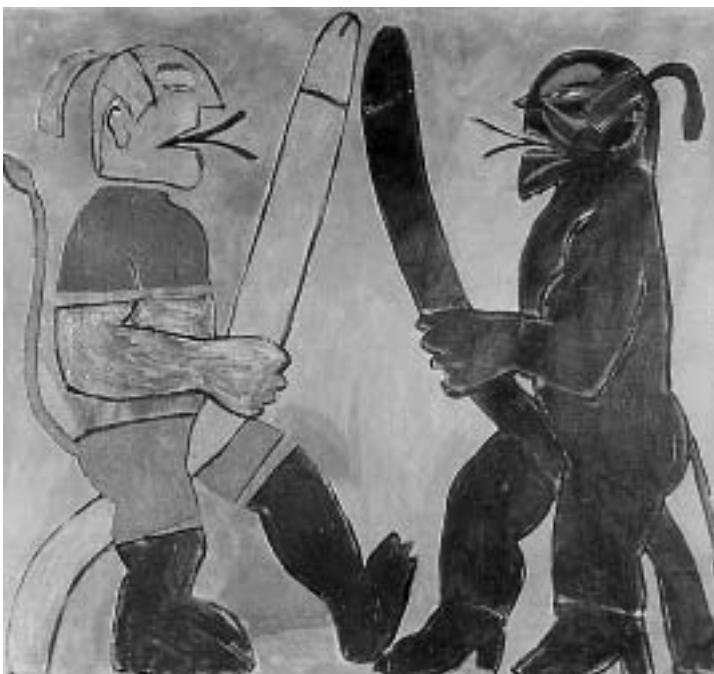
countering the pathos-filled language of the underground Solidarity and the tradition of European high culture, rather than providing a diagnosis of the reality or a prophetic vision of the future in Eastern Europe, where, at the moment, chaotic free market forces and capitalism were developing much more rapidly than the structures of open and democratic society. However, this short film could be seen as a metaphoric conception of the future in which, as during the period when the *Communist Manifesto* was written, the word 'freedom' tended to signify freedom to acquire material wealth rather than describe civic participation in a political process.

The spectres of freedom and of the fall of Communism were not the only apparitions haunting Eastern Europe during the 1980s. The other was the

spectre of the new expression or neo-Expressionist movement, which haunted not only Eastern Europe but also Western Europe, as well as South and North America. In this context the increasingly rapid emergence of the art scene from under the shadow of Yalta was connected with the critique of the avant-garde or neo-avant-garde and the influence of neo-Expressionism, sometimes referred to as the trans-avant-garde in Eastern Europe. The term was adopted from the 1982 book of that title written by an Italian art critic, Achille Bonito Oliva, who in his survey of the new movement entirely ignored the art scene on the ‘other’ side of the Iron Curtain.<sup>4</sup> In Poland, where (as in other countries of the region) art of the 1980s was not limited to neo-Expressionism,<sup>5</sup> the negative and critical attitude of neo-Expressionism towards the avant-garde tradition coincided with a new interest in politics fuelled by the introduction of martial law, a wave of protests, the boycott of the official cultural institutions by Polish artists and intellectuals and the development of the underground and the so-called ‘church’ art scene. The artists associated with neo-Expressionism, here as elsewhere, engaged in a campaign aimed to discredit both avant-garde and neo-avant-garde by accusing them of hermeticism and Parnassianism. Here, however, in contrast to other countries of the region, such critiques of art often went hand in hand with political critiques. In this particular instance, the neo-avant-garde was accused of supporting the Communist regime, especially during the 1970s, a period marked by widespread conformism. The cultivation of an autonomous status (in reality much more Modernist than neo-avant-garde) and celebration of one’s own, self-referential art problematic was now interpreted as a sign of support for the regime. This type of critical discourse developed in Poland mainly within circles associated with the political opposition, but not exclusively. It was also adopted by the artists of the so-called ‘third circuit’ (neither official nor oppositional), though they tended to treat the political or the ideological dimension of the neo-avant-garde work with much greater detachment. Searching for the third way, the artists tended to ignore current politics or to approach them with a wink and nod, in a contrarian attitude directed against intensely politicized oppositional circles and culture produced within their sphere.

A phenomenon that became symptomatic of this way of thinking was the Orange Alternative. This loosely affiliated Polish collective did not operate directly or exclusively within the art scene, though its members were linked to the arts by their ‘professional’ and educational backgrounds. Waldemar Frydrych, the founder of the Orange Alternative, also known as the Major, frequently described the Orange Alternative as a phenomenon related to Dada and Fluxus traditions, street theatre and guerrilla art. He also often described the movement he helped to create as ‘socialist Surrealism’. Most broadly

defined, the Orange Alternative was located at the juncture of culture, politics and art.<sup>6</sup> It was one of the most interesting East European groups of the period, whose value and significance was defined by a black and white context into which the group introduced a 'chromatic' range. The group organized street 'happenings' that parodied the reality of the Communist system. It 'celebrated' official Communist holidays, such as 1 May, Police Day, October Revolution Day and so forth, by organizing public distributions of scarce yet basic consumer products such as toilet paper and sanitary napkins. Those playful 'interventions', which made references to an art tradition but also led to altercations with the Communist police, raised serious questions about the meaning of politics, opposition and underground in the face of absurd reality. Because the reality was, in fact, so patently ridiculous, those questions proved to be extremely poignant. The lack of toilet paper in the stores was as absurd as the reaction by the police to the Orange Alternative celebration of Santa Claus announced for the day before the Christmas Eve. During the police action aimed at stopping the project from taking place, the policemen, unable to distinguish between 'the real' Santa Clauses stationed in front of the supermarkets and the members of the Orange Alternative 'dressed up' as Santas, simply arrested them all. Similarly, the decision of the Polish police to arrest anyone found wearing a red piece of clothing or carrying a red object on a busy



202. Ryszard Grzyb, *Duel with Bean Pods*, 1985, National Museum, Poznań.

203. Ryszard Woźniak,  
*Exorcism*, 1984.



weekday merely because the Orange Alternative urged everyone to celebrate the anniversary of the October Revolution by 'decorating' oneself with a red element (scarf, tie or ribbon) was equally absurd. But if such reactions were ridiculous, was not the entire regime of General Wojciech Jaruzelski, together with his decree of martial law, equally preposterous? And how about the pathos of the political underground, with its rhetoric of destiny and struggle for national liberation taken straight out of the nineteenth century and its fawning subservience to the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church? The Orange Alternative, through its absurd street actions and demonstrations, forced one to consider such questions much more effectively and profoundly than any church procession or Sunday sermon delivered by a parish priest. The Communist regime was much more threatened and undermined by such actions than by any 'normal' demonstrations organized by the Solidarity underground. It was much more practically and ideologically prepared to respond to the latter. Those 'normal' forms of protest were part of the system's paradigm, whereas the former were not; they exceeded and transgressed the system itself. In other words, the actions staged by the Orange Alternative were fictions operating within a world of fictions, and as such revealed the essential character of the reality, its ritual (the official celebrations of the October Revolution) and absurd (the chronic lack of sanitary napkins) nature. They

demonstrated the absurdity of the final phase of the Communist system at the time when the spectre of its downfall was already beginning to haunt Eastern Europe. Those actions themselves were symptoms of that spectre, which constituted an essential aspect of the definition of the ‘real’.

A phenomenon analogous to the Orange Alternative on a purely artistic level was the formation in Poland of numerous art groups, among which the collective Gruppa (double ‘p’ made an ironic reference to German) received the most notoriety. The painters who formed the collective – Ryszard Grzyb (illus. 202), Paweł Kowalewski, Jarosław Modzelewski, Włodzimierz Pawlak, Marek Sobczyk and Ryszard Woźniak (illus. 203) – linked their interest in neo-Expressionism, or to use the German term *Neue Wilde*, with an ironic attitude rendered particularly visible in the atmosphere of police terror and oppositional pathos. The commentary on this reality was formulated by Gruppa through the rhetoric of the absurd: ‘Militaria, genitals, and Indians, functioned as important, constituting repertoire of symbols, with which Gruppa communicated with its audience of peers, who populated the “happy openings” of their semi-private, semi-public exhibitions.’<sup>7</sup> The iconography of American Indians or of other equally exotic and mythical figures electrified the young audience. They were searching for their own, ‘different’ place in the black and white political reality of 1980s Poland, a reality marked by the sadness and greyness of life under martial law, a life full of soldiers, snow, the grandiloquent rhetoric of the political opposition and the Roman Catholic Church, and, simultaneously, of the gibberish of Communist propaganda. The absurd humour of Gruppa’s works and events contested this reality, in which both the regime and Solidarity operated within the same paradigm, in its totality. In addition to mythical figures, the members of Gruppa used eroticism as a scathing instrument to subject current political events to an ironic commentary. The exhibition of sexually charged imagery had an added dimension in Poland, a country where the Roman Catholic Church functioned not only as the source of moral authority, but also as the institutional support of the anti-Communist opposition. Young people were keenly aware of the fact that the church’s engagement in politics and its support for Solidarity were not entirely disinterested and that sooner or later the church would demand a payback. Gruppa defined a certain visual model of distance and irony that would later, at the end of the 1980s, develop among others into graffiti art providing street-level, satirical commentary on the return of the Eastern European ‘freedom’. However, by then Gruppa had ceased to exist. Its members went their own ways, often losing the critical edge of their art.

Other Polish groups that formed during this period could be viewed from a similar perspective: the Poznań-based Koło Klipsa (Klips’ Circle) (1983–

90; Leszek Knałkowski, Mariusz Kruk, Wojciech Kujawski, Piotr Kurka, Krzysztof Markowski, Mariusz Młodzianowski and Piotr Postaremczak); the Wrocław based Luxus (among others Paweł Jarodzki and Bożena Grzyb-Jarodzka); the Warsaw group with the German-Russian name Neue Bieriemennost (Mirosław Bałka, Mirosław Filonik and Marek Krajewski); and many others. Like Gruppa, those collectives also looked for their artistic identity along the ‘third way’, beyond the official exhibition system as well as the oppositional (church-based) one. They all tried to define their position in reference to a rejection of the analytic tradition of conceptualism, searching for their inspiration among varied trends of sensual new painting, neo-Expressionism, colourful installations, absurd iconographies and so on. The majority of those younger artists, in particular the members of Gruppa, looked to a somewhat older artist, Edward Dwurnik, whose sarcastic paintings, created during the 1970s, explored the absurdity of the Communist reality. During the period of martial law, Dwurnik added the habits of the Warsaw oppositional salon society to his repertoire of themes, ridiculing their grotesque character and antagonizing the ‘independent’ church-based intellectual circles (illus. 204).

If in Poland the tension between the generation of artists associated with new expression and those associated with neo-avant-garde was based on the fact that the former accused the latter of hermeticism, Parnassianism and



204. Edward Dwurnik, Free Soup, 1972.  
National Museum, Poznań.

205. Jiří Sopko,  
*One and Three*,  
1970.



conformism, in neighbouring Czechoslovakia, younger artists, who also frequently fell under the stylistic sway of neo-Expressionism, were doing so from a very different position. They were attempting to leave behind the discourse and atmosphere of conspiratorial, forbidden art – art practice pushed outside the boundaries of the ‘acceptable’ art scene by the ‘normalized’ Communist reality. Young artists wished to take art out of the sphere of oppositional ethos and to give it a ‘normal’ character. This was, therefore, a movement in the opposite direction to that taking place in Poland. Unlike their Polish counterparts, who boycotted official institutions and embraced the ‘third way’, the Czechoslovak artists wished to gain public acceptance and to show their work in the open. In other words, they were rejecting the political engagement and opposition to the regime embraced by the underground artists of the previous generation. This was not a matter of collaborating with the regime, but rather of taking advantage of the regime’s weakness to situate oneself within the official art scene and to take up a ‘normal’ art career. This art strategy coincided with the growing popularity of what was described in the majority of the East European countries as postmodernism. This form of practice generally involved revision of the avant-garde paradigm and a turn in the direction of sensualism, collage, appropriation, heterogeneity and stylistic

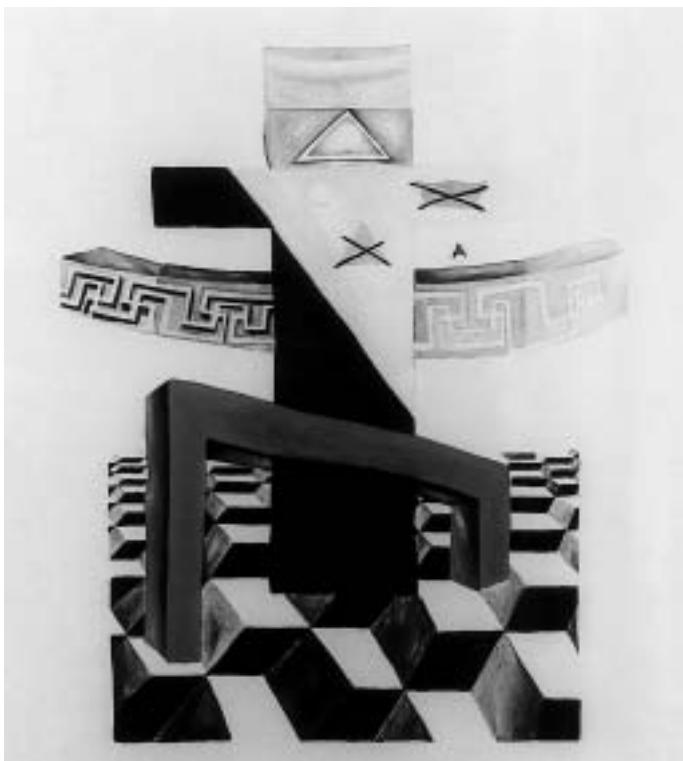
eclecticism, as well as a strong emphasis on individual and subjective expression. In reality, one could say that this was a form of ‘reactionary postmodernism’, linked with the wave of interest in neo-Expressionist painting. It was a form of reaction because like other earlier returns to representation, this interest in figuration was also rooted in the rejection of critical art practice.<sup>8</sup> The Czechoslovak artists looked to German art as a source of inspiration. To a certain extent, this may have been an expression of East European solidarity, since German neo-Expressionism was in part created by East German immigrants to the West, artists such as George Baselitz or A. R. Penck.<sup>9</sup> While in Poland Dwurnik played the role of the godfather of Polish neo-Expressionism, in Czechoslovakia that task fell to Jiří Sopko (illus. 205).<sup>10</sup>

Neo-Expressionism appeared as a movement in Czechoslovakia in the mid-1980s. It came to public notice through a series of exhibitions held under the common title *Confrontations*.<sup>11</sup> The shows, which recycled the name given to a series of exhibitions that inaugurated post-Stalinist Modernism in Czechoslovakia during the 1950s, were organized by students of the Prague Academy of Fine Arts. The first exhibition in the series, held in June 1984, took place in the studio of one of the leading artists of that movement, Jiří David. The generation of the ‘forbidden’ artists was also beginning to emerge from the underground and organize public shows, such as *Fórum '88* (both the first and the last such show under the Communist rule), which gathered a significant number of artists connected with the independent art scene.<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that large-scale exhibitions such as *Fórum '88* or *Confrontations* were a symptom of the 1980s transformations taking place in Eastern Europe. Similar art events were organized in Poland by Ryszard Ziarkiewicz: *Expression of the '80s* (1986), *Radical Realism–Concrete Abstraction* (1987), *Paradise Lost* (1990); in Hungary Lóránd Hegyi organized *Eclectic '85*, a series of four *Uj Szenzibilitás/New Sensibility* exhibitions (1981, 1983, 1985, 1987), and *Wet Paint* (1985); in the GDR, the First Leipzig Autumn Salon was held in 1984.

The issue of the generational revolt of younger artists, directed in equal measure against the generation of ‘forbidden art’ as well as avant-garde tradition, found focus in the group Tvrdochlaví – Jiří David (illus. 206), Stanislav Diviš (illus. 207), Michal Gabriel, Zdeněk Lhotský, Václav Marhoul, Stefan Milkov, Petr Nikl, Jaroslav Róna, František Skála and Čestimir Suška), formed in 1987.<sup>13</sup> The collective, which began exhibiting together in 1987, broke a taboo of the ‘normalized’ Czechoslovak art scene by appearing as an organized group. It also invoked the tradition of organized art groups and collective demonstration of certain artistic attitudes. The group’s name, Tvrdochlaví (‘the hard-headed ones’) is particularly significant in this context. It ironically refers to the hard-line, pro-Stalinist Communists, who were often described as hard-

headed, and, more literally, to stubbornness, resistance to persuasion and unyielding insistence on the rightness of one's own views. It also made a reference to the Czech group Tvrdošijni ('the stubborn ones'), active from 1918 through 1924,<sup>14</sup> who engaged in a critique of the radical avant-garde, directed its attention towards more subjective and 'domesticated' forms of expression and favoured acceptance of the 'here and now' over any radical rejection of artistic tradition and of art's social framework. This particular aspect reveals the reactionary character of Tvrdochlav I mentioned earlier.

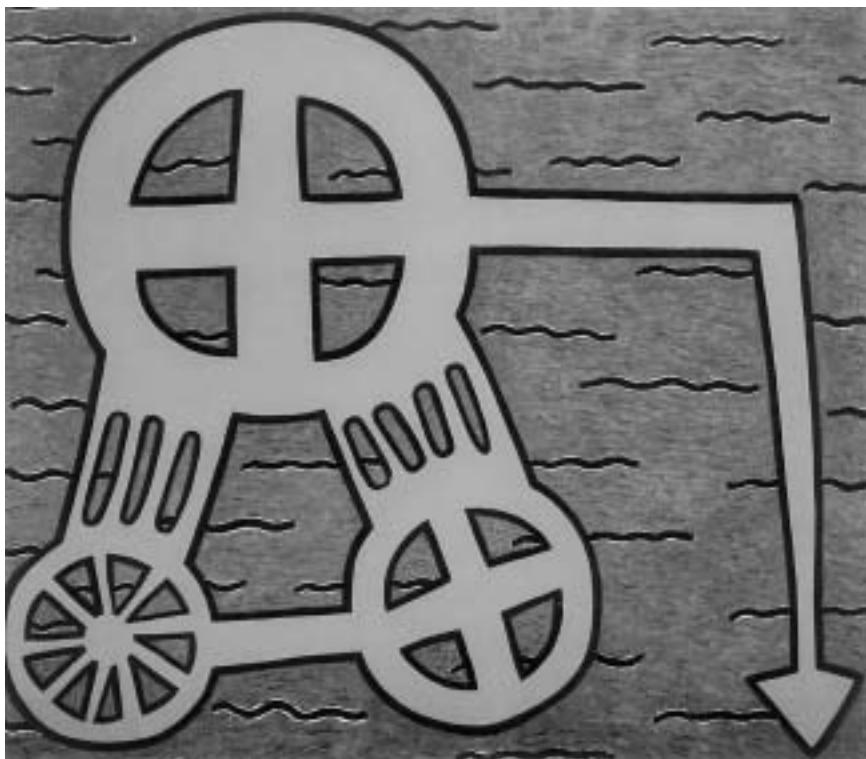
This type of declared and contrarian (in Tvrdochlav's case) emulation, as well as a stylistic orientation that rejected ethical and artistic purism, recalled the strategy of the Polish Gruppa, even though the Polish and Czech artists operated in very different environments. The artists of Gruppa and Tvrdochlav shared the iconosphere of visually odd elements, the unencumbered use of iconographic motifs, stylistic syncretism and reliance on many different models, all situated within the context of neo-Expressionism. Their works, filled with strange figures and shapes, erotic and fantastic imagery, vivid colours and playfully subjective representations, contrasted with the pathos and seriousness of the artistic underground. The Polish artists distanced



206. Jiří David,  
*Lotharingian Cross*, 1986.

themselves not only from that cultural opposition but also from official art institutions. In the early 1980s they simply ignored them. In contrast, Czechoslovak artists attempted to explode the official structures of the art scene by introducing ambitious underground art projects into them. They also tried to 'normalize' the independent art scene by introducing 'normal' art into it as well as a 'normalized' notion of the art career based in the belief that artists should exhibit their works in public, not fight the political system. It is clear, therefore, that despite certain similarities these were not identical situations or identical attitudes.

The situation in Hungary was even more remote from that of Poland in the 1980s. It was also further along the way by several steps than Czechoslovakia in terms of the artists' relationships with the public and the institutional art scene and the attitudes of those institutions towards the artists. One could say that out of the three countries, the situation in Hungary was the most 'normal'. This 'normality' had very different impact on the artists' careers from the situation in the 1970s, when Hungarian artists, functioning in opposition to the official institutional structures, attempted to establish contact with the



207. Stanislav  
Diviš, *Sun's  
Cart*, 1987.

global culture of the neo-avant-garde. In the 1980s those same institutions were looking for artists who already had contacts with the international scene of neo-Expressionism so as to recruit them in order to advertise the changes taking place in the country. Naturally, as in Poland and Czechoslovakia, Hungarian art of the 1980s was not limited to neo-Expressionism.<sup>15</sup> However, neo-Expressionism certainly attracted the greatest share of attention among critics and the public. The improvement in the economic situation in Hungary as well as gradual changes taking place in social structures and the system of values created a context for this type of art. Miklós Erdély, a charismatic figure of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, compared the ‘new painter’ to a taxi driver in 1985, suggesting that both inscribed themselves into the environment of Hungary’s ‘new economic policies’.<sup>16</sup> This new climate was characterized by the promotion of individual initiatives and a business-like attitude. The failure of traditional governmental structures in the economic as well as cultural spheres created opportunities for the creation of new exhibition venues that resembled less alternative gathering places of the 1970s, and more Western-style private galleries. Among those, the Rabinec Studio, a completely private and legal art gallery, foreshadowed things to come.

However, the most significant changes took place within the political structures of the state, which in the 1980s revealed a considerable openness to the new art. The Hungarian regime was very interested in cultivating the country’s liberal image. To that end it organized, among others, a 1985 conference on censorship sponsored by the UNESCO Cultural Forum and the Helsinki Human Rights Association. Although the conference functioned as a fig leaf for the failing regime, it did offer evidence of the government’s changing tactics in dealing with world opinion and local intellectual circles. During the conference the official and oppositional seminars mixed freely, despite the regime’s feeble efforts to prevent this.<sup>17</sup> The Hungarian government also permitted the creation of international institutions. It is not coincidental that the main centre in the network of institutions dedicated to documentation of contemporary art in Eastern Europe, established and funded by the George Soros Foundation, was established in Budapest in the mid-1980s. Notably, in 1987, Museum Ludwig opened a branch in Budapest.

Simultaneously, Hungarian artists staged an offensive on the international arena. The presence of Hungarian art in that context did not resemble in any way the partisan tactics of János Brendel, who in the 1970s organized exhibitions of Hungarian neo-avant-garde artists in Poland semi-legally and with great dedication. At the 1986 Venice Biennale, one of the most important and ‘official’ international exhibitions, Hungary exhibited painters associated with neo-Expressionism – Ákos Birkás (illus. 208), Károly Kelemen and István

208. Ákos  
Birkás,  
*Head 25*, 1987.  
Hungarian  
National  
Gallery,  
Budapest.



Nádler (illus. 209). Katalin Néray, the curator of the Hungarian section, had the full blessing of the government to show the world Hungarian art that was connected with the global art scene and to provide evidence of the cultural modernization of the Hungarian People's Republic, something that would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier.

It is rather characteristic that in Hungary, as elsewhere, neo-Expressionism was taken up by artists previously associated with neo-avant-garde. Miklós Erdély himself declared in the early 1980s 'the end of conceptual art'.<sup>18</sup> The

209. István Nádler,  
*Hommage to Malevich*, 1985.  
Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz.



artists who participated in the 1986 Venice Biennale were previously either involved with the neo-avant-garde (Ákos Birkás, Károly Kelemen and István Nádler) or neo-Constructivism (Imre Bak), and yet were now becoming the leading figures of the contemporary movement based in the critique of the avant-garde tradition.

This continuity constituted a defining characteristic of the Hungarian art scene, in contrast to Poland and Czechoslovakia, where the strain between the avant-garde tradition and neo-avant-garde practice also manifested generational tensions. If the critique of avant-garde attitudes by the artists associated with neo-Expressionism – who rejected intellectual rigour and hermeticism in favour of a subjective approach and emotionally free expression – was connected in the majority of the countries of Eastern Europe with a generational

shift within the art scenes, in Hungary there was no such break. The same artists (though of course there were also others) simply made a move from one phase to the next within the evolution of European art. The younger Hungarian art historians of contemporary art, who have noted this phenomenon, have questioned the extent to which the critique of neo-avant-garde could be considered under those conditions to be 'genuine' and to what extent was it motivated by the changing external circumstances.<sup>19</sup> In light of the newest history of Hungarian art and of the political processes that took place in the 1980s, it is likely that the large-scale move to neo-Expressionism in Hungary was by no means free of such considerations.

However, there were several Hungarian artists who developed strong individual personalities and who did not circumscribe their work within the

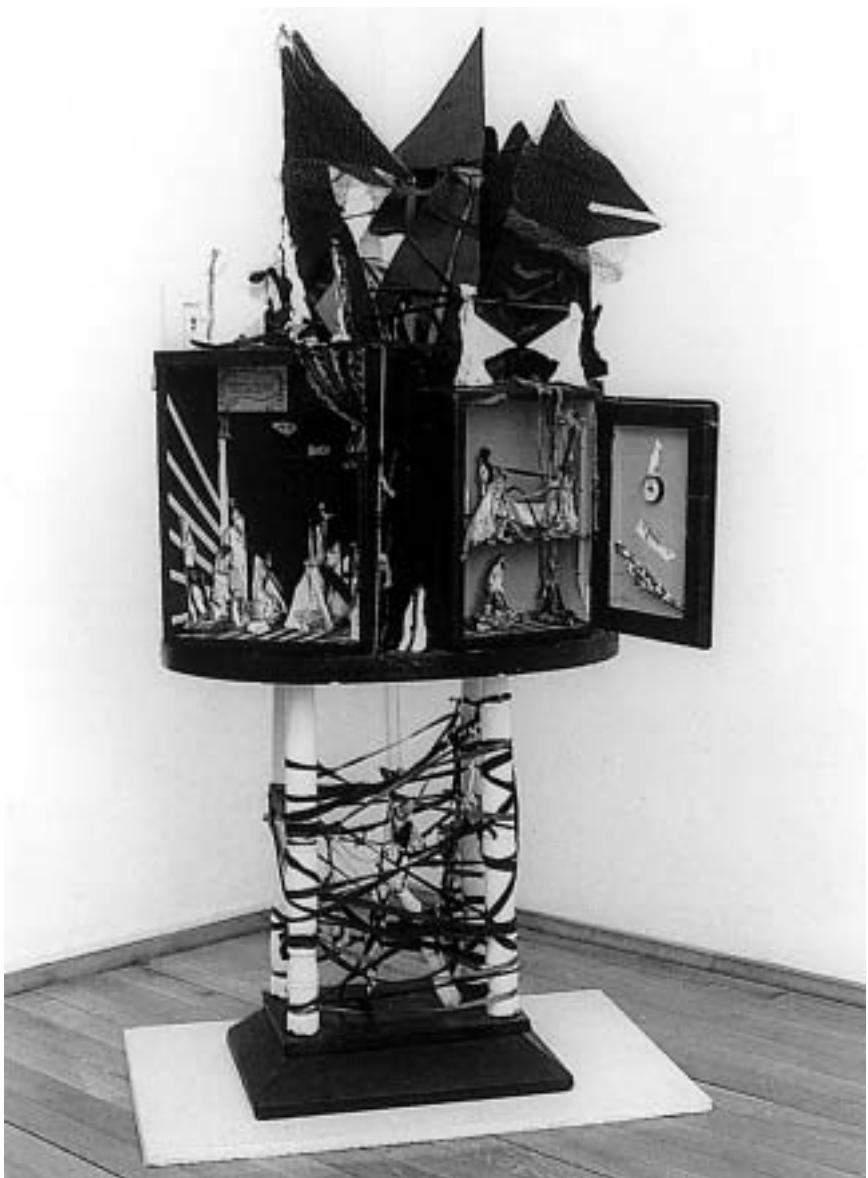


210. László Fehér, *Looking into the Well*, 1988.  
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest.

scope of numerous rhetorical pronouncements by Lóránd Hegyi on ‘radical eclecticism’, ‘new sensitivity’, ‘subjectivism’ and so forth. In particular, I have in mind two very different artists: László Fehér and El Kazovszkij. In the early 1980s Fehér produced a series of highly original canvases dealing with the problem of memory. He inscribed silhouetted, transparent human figures (adults and children, men and women, and family groups) onto fragments of an urban or natural landscape painted with a sensitive handling of the empty space, in itself nostalgic and mysterious (illus. 210). This type of painting had little in common with neo-Expressionism. It was firmly rooted in the individual and collective exploration of the memory of the Holocaust. It recalled a family album from which the closest family members have disappeared, leaving only a trace, a barely outlined silhouette visible in familiar daily situations: a shared dinner, a walk through the city, a vacation and so on. Life and death are mixed up in Fehér’s work, as they are in our memory, which permits those who have died to live among those who have survived. By referencing the Holocaust, the artist broke one of the taboos of the Communist culture that monopolized and institutionalized its memory, fashioning it into a propaganda instrument. The exploration of this subject by the Hungarian artist, his effort to bring it down to the level of individual memory and, above all, individual ‘use’ should be seen as an effort to take away from the regime that which it considered to be its exclusive domain, not only in Hungary but throughout the Eastern Bloc.

El Kazovszkij produced a very different body of works, one that brought the neo-Expressionist aesthetic to bear not only on painting but also on installation (illus. 211). Éva Forgács described the artist’s arrangements as colourful, lively, very dynamic, often filled with sublimated beauty, very theatrical, visually rich and operating through mythological references grounded in a broadly erudite imagination connected with personal and private motifs.<sup>20</sup> Those features distinguished Kazovszkij’s work from the rather superficial rhetoric of Hungarian ‘radical eclecticism’. Forgács also made a connection between the artist’s exploration of sensual beauty and homoerotic signification, juxtaposing her work with the tradition and contemporary character of the homosexual subculture explored by such artists as Francis Bacon, Derek Jarman, Pier-Paolo Pasolini, Oscar Wilde and others, noting that the Hungarian artist’s interest in Hellenistic culture provided a lynchpin for such analysis.<sup>21</sup> The interpretation of the homoerotic tendencies in Kazovszkij’s work is particularly important, since it points to yet another broken taboo of the Communist culture. The Communists succeeded in almost entirely eliminating this theme from public discourse, pushing it into the territory of profoundly closeted privacy. This is one of the reasons why gay men and women encountered such problems in Eastern Europe after 1989. The

211. El  
Kazovszkij,  
*Raised Still-  
Life III*, 1982–5.  
István Király  
Múzeum,  
Székes-  
fehérvár.



conservative character of the societies in this part of the world was much more profoundly rooted than one would have expected, given the legacy of Communism. The liberation that came in the wake of the ‘autumn of nations’ had a primarily political character: it was a liberation from the military domination by the Soviets. As such, it had only a very limited impact on the habits of mind and did not lead to a more liberal way of thinking and,

especially, to greater openness to the ‘other’. The term ‘liberalism’ was quickly applied to the economic arena. After 1989, it began to be identified with a more or less unencumbered freedom to pursue wealth, rather than with open-mindedness, especially in reference to those areas that acquired taboo status under Communism: homosexuality, the social, political and cultural rights of sexual minorities and the place of this type of imagery within the contemporary iconosphere. The sensual beauty of Kazovszkij’s work defined in this context the cutting edge of a later, very significant, theme, though it was largely ignored by the East European intellectuals and political and media elites.

The ‘autumn of nations’ spread in 1989 to all East European countries. In the decade preceding the end of the Yalta era, they were all haunted by the spectres of freedom and new expression, though the clarity of those apparitions and the degree of their involvement in the issue of resistance to power (that of the regime and of the opposition in Poland), or to official political structures (in Hungary) was highly varied. In the countries ruled by hardline Communists, the independent art circles had limited opportunities to manoeuvre, though the pressure exerted by them within the public sphere grew significantly. This was the case in Romania, where Ceaușescu focused his obsessive attention almost entirely during this period on the project to erect a gigantic monument to his rule, the People’s Palace. A large area of the old Bucharest was razed for the purpose under the guidance of Romanian and visiting architects.

As in other countries of the region, Romanian art of the 1980s cannot be contained within the frame of new expression, but as elsewhere here too this form of art practice attracted the most attention from intellectual and artistic circles and was connected most closely with the discourse of postmodernism. Uniquely, it also developed very local meanings grounded in ‘neo-Byzantinism’.<sup>22</sup> Those tendencies were associated with the entry onto the Romanian art scene of a new generation of artists engaged in a polemic confrontation with the older generation associated with neo-Constructivism and neo-avant-garde. This generational tension distinguished Romanian art from that of Hungary, where the same generation of artists previously associated with neo-avant-garde was now defining the environment for the art of the 1980s.

Similarly, interesting changes (also from the perspective of generational tensions) appeared in the second half of the 1980s in Bulgaria. A generation of younger artists that included Luchezar Boyadjiev and Nedko Solakov would over the next decade mark the presence of Bulgarian art on the international arena to an unprecedented degree. The experiences of the late 1980s were summed up in the exhibition *n-Forms* (‘New Forms’). This pioneering effort revealed the desire of younger Bulgarian artists to move into the territory of contemporary art.<sup>23</sup> However, the changes taking place were not occurring

outside the context of a dialogue with the tradition. This dialogue took a unique form that revealed the new climate of Bulgarian culture. For instance, Luchezar Boyadjiev created a series of canvases titled *Fortification of Faith* (illus. 212) that transformed classic iconographic motifs by exploring the possibility of Christ having an identical twin. Asking how under those circumstances one would approach the issues of the Nativity, the Crucifixion and so on, the artist created



212. Luchezar Boyadjiev,  
*Fortification of Faith*, 1991,  
courtesy  
Luchezar  
Boyadjiev and  
Diana Gräfin  
von Hohenthal,  
Berlin.

various options for representing those events. This was a very different approach to tradition, religion and spiritual heritage from Romanian neo-Byzantinism; it was more closely related to the revisionist attitudes resented by the younger generation of East European artists in the 1980s.

The spectre of freedom that was haunting Eastern Europe in the 1980s also appeared in the GDR. During its last years, the Communist regime of East Germany, which embraced a virtually orthodox model of Marxism, continued to erect monuments to the Master, such as Ludwig Engelhardt's *Marx-Engels-Denkmal* (1986). But the spectre of freedom slowly but steadily found its way, even in this frontline state of the Eastern Bloc. The replacement of the hard-liner Walter Ulbricht by supposedly liberal Erich Honecker in 1971 and the introduction of the new cultural policy known as 'Weite und Vielfalt' ('Space and Diversity') encouraged a certain degree of optimism. In reality, Honecker had no intention of liberalizing cultural life in the country under his rule. When the USSR began to introduce *perestroika* in the 1980s, Honecker was one of its most adamant and vigorous critics. However, the process of liberalization, once started, could not be stopped; it could be only slowed down. Paradoxically, a considerable number of artists, especially those belonging to the older generations, supported the Honecker regime. They could not admit the possibility of the regime change in East Germany and felt a certain solidarity with the official rhetoric of Marxism-Leninism, seeing their place almost exclusively within the existing organizational and political structures. This peculiar alliance meant that the more important reforms in the organizations governing the GDR art scene took place right before the fall of the Wall, at the time when they were no longer necessary. For instance, during the tenth anniversary congress of the Verband Bildener Künstler-DDR (VBK-DDR), the only official artists' association in the GDR, which took place in October 1988, significant changes were made to the organization's structure and its leadership.<sup>24</sup> Also, the last official exhibition of art in the GDR, *Konturen*, which opened on 5 October and remained on view until 3 December 1989, coinciding with the destruction of the Berlin Wall on 9 November of the same year, had a very different character from the previous official shows, mainly due to the participation of younger artists who were working within the purview of new expression.<sup>25</sup> Although the exhibition was intended to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the GDR (the artists chosen to participate were all born after 1949), in reality, it became a wake to commemorate the passing of the old regime.

The art itself – new expression, neo-Expressionism, *Neue Wilde* or however one was to characterize the phenomenon – had a particular status in the GDR. As elsewhere, this type of work did not comprise the entire spectrum

of culture produced in East Germany during the 1980s. However, unlike in other countries of the region, such as Poland, neo-Expressionism did not function in opposition to the neo-avant-garde. The East German group Auto-performationsartistik,<sup>26</sup> which continued the tradition of body art pioneered by Viennese actionists, had a significant impact on the East German art scene of the 1980s. The artists associated with mail-art also linked the tradition of the neo-avant-garde with elements of neo-Expressionism,<sup>27</sup> and the leading figure of the movement, Robert Rehfeldt, provided an important reference point for the young and unofficial art of the GDR.

The unusual character of the East German art scene was connected with the fact that unlike in other countries of Eastern Europe, where neo-Expressionism was often interpreted in terms of an influence of German, that is, 'foreign', culture, in the GDR it was perceived as a local tradition, especially since a number of the leading Western artists associated with the movement originally came from East Germany (Georg Baselitz, A. R. Penck). This link was felt by the artists of the middle as well as younger generations, irrespective of their generational differences in attitudes towards the state and the official cultural policies.

One of the artists of the middle generation who showed interest in neo-Expressionism was Hartwig Ebersbach. Ebersbach was a faculty member in one of the best known schools of visual art in the GDR, namely the Leipzig Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst (HfGB), where from 1984 he directed an experimental art studio. The artist, who lived and worked in Leipzig, was seen as a member of a heterogeneous art scene known as the 'Leipzig School', though he was clearly one of its more distinctive members.<sup>28</sup> Balancing between accepted/official and rejected/unofficial art, the artist, immersed in the official structures as a member of the artists' union (VBK-DDR) and a professor at the HfGB, gained the respect of independent artists as well as international (mainly West German) audiences. His exceptional status was based on the fact that he functioned as a link between the independent circles of the younger Leipzig artists, with whom he interacted as a professor at the art school, and the official art scene, which treated him as its *enfant terrible*.<sup>29</sup> However, the reason why Ebersbach's work is of interest has little to do with his pedagogical influence or the stylistic character of his paintings and installations, clearly situated within the aesthetics of neo-Expressionism. Rather, it is based in the relationship between the content and the stylistic form of his work. That relationship was clearly grounded in the official political and ideological discourse of the GDR, especially during the artist's early period, during which he produced such works as *Dedicated to Chile* (1974), *Thälmann's Portrait* (illus. 213), *Anti-Imperialist Solidarity* (1977), and so forth.<sup>30</sup> Later, especially after

leaving the faculty position at the HfG B, Ebersbach's subjects acquired a much more personal character.

The First Leipzig Autumn Salon (Der 1. Leipziger Herbstsalon), organized in conjunction with the Leipzig International Fair of 1984, was one of the last institutional initiatives based on the idea that it was necessary to cooperate with the regime and that it was possible to make ambitious and modern art within the framework of such cooperation. It was also one of the first large-scale, more or less independent initiatives by GDR artists.<sup>31</sup> The exhibition made a conscious reference to the First Leipzig Autumn Salon, organized in 1913 by Herwarth Walden, but with the exception of the name and the desire to continue the Expressionist, modern tradition, the two shows had nothing in common. The dramatic difference in the context of the two exhibitions determined that outcome. The 1984 exhibition, organized by a group of activists and artists (Hans Hendrik Grimmling, Frieder Heinze, Lutz Dammbeck, Günter Huniat and Olaf Wegewitz), did not take place in a Prussian state that respected to a greater or lesser extent the idea of artistic freedom of expression, or, at the very least, did not pay too much attention to such matters, but in a country engulfed by late totalitarianism, in which political leaders wilfully resisted the climate of *perestroika*. To a certain extent, the exhibition represented a modest gesture of resistance, since the artists, who were all members of the VBK-DDR, organized



213. Hartwig Ebersbach, Thälmann's Portrait, 1974–5. Museum der bildenden Kunst, Leipzig.

the show independently of the official artists' association. On the other hand, the exhibition was by no means a private initiative that ignored the political and the administrative system. On the contrary, the organizers applied for the necessary permits and permissions, making sure to guarantee the legal, political and bureaucratic safety of the show. They received the official permits, though with certain restrictions, such as the prohibition of any contact with the Western press.

The exhibition was a great triumph not only as a showcase of the new, modern art, primarily based in neo-Expressionism, but also as a successfully implemented effort to legalize an independent art show. At the same time, it was criticized by the younger artists, who by this point were no longer concerned with permits, permissions and prohibitions and were organizing their own, independent exhibitions. This tension reveals once again the existence of a generational conflict. The new generation of artists was neither 'for' nor 'against' the political system; they simply operated outside of it.<sup>32</sup> This dynamic generation of artists, and more broadly the cultural and social bohemia that organized, expressed and enjoyed itself without paying attention to politics or ideology, attempted to function within a sphere that paralleled that occupied by the state.<sup>33</sup> Paradoxically, the economic system of the GDR made this possible. Christoph Tannert recalled that because of cheap food, inexpensive apartments and free and universal healthcare, even if accompanied by the requirement to register one's place of residence and work (both of which were commonly falsified to prevent unwanted inquiries during document controls often carried out by the police), it was possible to freely contest the system while living a life of artistic bohemia.<sup>34</sup> It is not that these circles were ignored by the notorious East German secret political police, the STASI. After the fall of the GDR, when the STASI archives were opened, it became apparent that many of the most charismatic leaders of East German bohemia were in fact STASI informants.

East German bohemia never became a bridge between the GDR and West Germany, despite a number of early, dramatic appeals by some of its sympathizers for respect for the continuity of traditions.<sup>35</sup> Some of those who originally called for such recognition, in particular Christoph Tannert and Eugen Blume, later changed their position. They accused East German alternative culture not only of a significant collaboration with the STASI, but also of moral ambivalence, artistic superficiality and a derivative dependence on global contemporary art.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, East German bohemia, alternative culture and unofficial art did not play a significant role in the transition from the GDR to the unified Germany and, therefore, from state socialism to market capitalism. That function was performed by a small but dynamic private gallery,

Eigen+Art, operated in Leipzig by Gerd ‘Harry’ Lybke, also known as Judy Lybke.<sup>37</sup> The gallery, which operated not only during the last years of Honecker’s regime but also after unification, linked late Communism, with its bureaucratized structures and STASI surveillance, and free market capitalism, introduced after unification into the territories of the GDR by the federal administration. In 1992 Lybke moved the gallery to Berlin, to one of the most interesting locations in the new German capital, the Auguststrasse. Following the lead of Monika Sykutera, one could say that Lybke ‘smoothly manoeuvred his initiative through the turbulence created by [German] unification on the surface of the cultural landscape of capitalist Europe’.<sup>38</sup>

Eigen+Art did not have a programmatic character or explicitly favour certain types of art. It showed the participants of the First Leipzig Autumn Salon as well as artists of Autoperformationsartistik, who in a famous performance, *Allez! Arrest* (1988), spent eleven days and nights locked up in the gallery. The gallery also showed Joseph Beuys’s art documentation, in particular its more revolutionary aspects, omitted from the artist’s first (and only) official show in the GDR in 1988. It is important to note that Lybke directed the gallery with considerable professionalism. Eigen+Art was not an alternative gallery, run in an ‘amateur’ manner and focused exclusively on artistic values, like many such venues operating in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and ’80s. The gallery kept careful documentation, paid considerable attention to promotion and pursued particular tactical and strategic goals. One of its intuitive goals was to inscribe itself into the structures of the contemporary, capitalist commercial art world and to accomplish a smooth transition from the labyrinth of East German bureaucracy to a free market economy. Lybke clearly achieved this goal. In 1990, right after the fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification, Eigen+Art was the only East German gallery to participate in the Frankfurt Art Fair, one of the largest annual international art events in the world.

The destruction of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 opened the way for the unification of Germany and, somewhat later, of the main portion of Europe. Whereas its erection confirmed the partition of Germany and of the continent, its destruction was a palpable sign of the spectre of freedom haunting Eastern Europe and of the desire of the East Europeans to be ‘in Europe’. There was, however, at least one great European artist who accepted neither the partition of the continent nor the existence of the wall and who continually sought solutions for contemporary problems in unification and transgression of borders, who, to use Jacques Derrida’s words, revealed the ‘aporetic’ character of borders.<sup>39</sup> Joseph Beuys was not only interested in the revolution created by the Polish Solidarity or an alternative ‘third way’ to the oppositions of socialism and capitalism, East and West, collectivism and

individualism, but also a way to ‘punch through’ the wall in order to achieve spiritual, rather than economic (Lybke) unification. In 1964 the artist produced a declaration that suggested increasing the height of the Berlin Wall by 5 cm in order to improve its proportions. In 1972, during a short visit to East Berlin, he swept Karl-Marx-Platz after the 1 May parade. However, East German artists largely ignored Beuys during the 1960s and ’70s, probably due to the fact that they were not familiar with his work. They began showing interest in him only in the 1980s. Eugen Blume and Erhard Monden played key roles in spreading knowledge about Beuys among GDR artists.<sup>40</sup> In the early 1980s they organized a joint action with Beuys, *Sender-Receiver*, which took place over the German-German border and the Berlin Wall dividing Europe. The project consisted of a telephone conversation between Beuys in Düsseldorf and Blume and Monden in East Berlin, on 2 April 1983, between noon and 1:00 pm. Both parties recorded each other’s ideas, allowing Beuys to send his ideas to East Germany and Blume and Monden to send theirs West. One of the organizers recalled that for one hour the border disappeared. East German artists escaped the limitations of the totalitarian system and participated in global contemporary art.<sup>41</sup> A year later, on 8 April 1984, Beuys was supposed to come to East Berlin and personally participate in another project. He was prevented from doing so by those who were still guarding their wall. The artist did not receive an entry visa for the visit to the GDR and was stopped at the Berlin-Berlin – or rather Europe-Europe – border by East German border guards.

Several years later, in 1988, shortly after the artist’s death, the East German regime organized an exhibition of Beuys’s work in the GDR. This was the first official exhibition, though not the first exhibition, of his works on the eastern side of the wall. In 1981 the West German consulate in East Berlin showed some of his works in the exhibition *Multiplizierte Kunst 1965–1981*, creating thereby an opportunity for the artist’s first and last visit to the city.<sup>42</sup> The 1988 exhibition was perceived by the dissidents as a form of accommodation towards the art scene and therefore as an effort to manipulate and eliminate the key element of Beuys’s work, namely the appeal for the right to free thought and artistic expression.<sup>43</sup>

Three years after Beuys’s death, on 9 November 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. This event marked the symbolic, though not the actual, end of the Communist system in Eastern Europe. However, after the actual and symbolic destruction of the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall the political geography of Europe underwent a fundamental transformation. The disappearance of the bipolar world created a much more complicated situation than that which was in place before the wall went up. There were more countries in Europe, the borders were longer, and many more complicated divisions, tensions and even

wars were becoming apparent. After a portion of old Eastern Europe was integrated into the European Union, new borders and new walls were formed that transected the region in a manner not dissimilar from the Berlin Wall. The new border of the newly divided Europe runs now through the heart of the historic Eastern Europe, between Slovenia and Croatia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

It is quite certain that the historic and geographic dimensions of Europe are changing. We are experiencing a historic as well as geographic transformation; we are located in a crack between two periods and between two different forms of space. A key question that must be raised with regards to those changes has to do with the critical dimension of the new art geography, or, to use Irit Rogoff's terms, critical cartography or critical geography.<sup>44</sup> This type of critical reflection allows one to define the space in which we move. This space is currently demarcated by political and economic globalization and, as Slavoj Žižek has noted, it is marked by its ideology, namely multiculturalism. Globalism recalls the old, colonial discursive practices, but it is also different from them insofar as it treats the West as the subject of this colonization (as before) as well as its object.<sup>45</sup> Igor Zabel provides an analogous analysis, writing that global capitalism not only colonizes the world, but also its own home, or the West itself. It achieves total homogeneity. Zabel cites the Benetton advertising campaign, 'United Colours of Benetton', according to which supposedly different people (the assumed 'Others') appear strikingly similar while dressed in the company's clothing.<sup>46</sup> But is that really the case? Does the West colonize itself in the way that it colonizes other regions of the world? Are the current globalizing practices, with all their differences in the character of technology, infrastructure, transfer of information and capital, in fact so different from the old colonial practices?<sup>47</sup> Is it perhaps possible that the conviction that the negative aspects of globalization have the same impact on the centre (the West) as they do on the other regions of the world (for instance, the East) functions as the West's alibi against the charge of its colonial practices?

The conviction, or more accurately the illusion, that multiculturalism represents the equality of all cultures can function only when the processes of globalization appear spatially neutral, or when the centre appears de-centred and deprived of its power. This seeming spatial transparency can fool even the most critical minds, since their geographic horizons generally circumscribe only the metropolis. It is seldom noted that the subject of discussions concerning contemporary multiculturalism is the metropolis itself, not the pluralism of peripheral locations. Multiculturalism is presented as a pluralistic doctrine of cultural equality, but it is also almost completely devoid of

geographic tensions. An attempt to examine this ideology from a geographic perspective easily demonstrates that cultural equality is an illusion, one grounded in the assumption of neutrality of space. In other words, the discourse of multiculturalism describes the multi-ethnic character of a single location, the metropolis, which is then reproduced and automatically transferred to other locations: other (non-Western) metropolitan areas as well as extra-metropolitan territories. From that perspective, the multiculturalism of New York or London is structurally and semiotically analogous to that of Berlin, Moscow or Sarajevo. However, critical geography allows us to reveal the spatial dimension hidden within that conception, to give it consistency, to expose the illusion of its non-existence, to deconstruct the idea of the virtual world and of the dislocated subjectivity by demonstrating its hierarchical assumptions.<sup>48</sup>

Perhaps one should begin one's critical examination of the functioning of multiculturalism at the centre, in New York or London, since that is where it poses the greatest threat to the ethnic or national minorities inhabiting the metropolis, a threat described by Homi Bhabha as 'DissemiNation'.<sup>49</sup> Irrespective of its value as a defensive strategy used to safeguard the identity rights of ethnic minorities inhabiting the metropolis and its undeniably positive impact on the pluralization of educational systems, multiculturalism is, above all, used to assimilate minorities into structures of the Western world. Stuart Hall provides a wonderfully vivid and convincing (for the metropolitan intellectuals) example of this type of process in his description of 'culinary multiculturalism'. Here the supposed evidence of cultural pluralization, the eating of a Chinese, Indian, Italian or any other ethnic cuisine, still takes place within the confined space of Manhattan.<sup>50</sup> Rasheed Araeen identifies this issue in a less metaphorical and more direct way: multiculturalism is a symptom of the Western dominance and an alibi of its power.<sup>51</sup> If multiculturalism – understood as a postmodern formula of pluralistic culture and de-centred power – is questioned within a single territory such as New York or London, then its centre-specific character becomes visible. Simply put, the multiculturalism of New York and of London (staying rather obstinately with the example of those two Anglo-Saxon cities) is not the same as the multiculturalism of Sarajevo. In Eastern Europe, with the exception of Moscow (struggling with problems other than multiculturalism), there are no megametropolises, the main sites of the functioning of postmodern multiculturalism. Here multi-nationality poses a much more basic problem than multiculturalism. The functioning of the states in the region is still based more in Modernist nationalism and the 'nationalization' of culture than it is in the idea of a postmodern, post-national, multi-ethnic and multicultural metropolitan culture.<sup>52</sup> But in order to notice this difference, one must come here,

actually travel to the region, and not merely visit it virtually through the Internet accessible from a computer located in a comfortable Greenwich Village apartment. Since the virtualization of space is becoming an instrument of the centre's dominance, the introduction of a geographic dimension deprives the centre of its theoretical alibi and reveals the centre-based character of globalization and multiculturalism.

If the power is located in the West, then what relationship to that power can be found in the art produced in what could be described as Europe's 'grey zone'?<sup>53</sup> Naturally, it is impossible to generalize here. One can only point out tensions, divergences in the trajectories of the local art practice, a certain dialectic of cultural vectors mentioned in the introduction. Nedko Solakov, a Bulgarian artist, provides a humorous interpretation of this problem in his photograph *View to the West* (illus. 214). The image shows a viewing platform high above Sofia, with a wire barrier ostensibly installed to prevent suicidal leaps. Attached to the barrier is a sign stating 'View to the West'. What one sees, however, is the urban landscape of the East marked by quite 'un-Western' architectural landmarks, such as the domes of St Alexander Nevski Cathedral and, further away, the state ministries building, recalling the characteristic silhouette of Moscow Lomonosov University. One can also see a telescope though which one could expect to be able to look westward. The promised land is (still) beyond one's grasp; it is reachable and accessible only through optical



214. Nedko Solakov, *View to the West*, 1989.

215. Nedko Solakov, *Top Secret*, 1990.



technology. Moreover, it can be reached only by going through that which is immediately present and visible without the aid of a telescope: the traditional and the post-Soviet reality. In another work dating from approximately the same period, *Top Secret* (illus. 215), Solakov presented an opened 'top secret' file containing his personal records, commenting on the omnipresence of the secret police in a totalitarian system. In the open drawers of this archive, one encounters the artist's 'identity papers', official notes and records, which collectively form a certain type of documentation of the artist's life. Can we throw away the contents of such drawers when the state has failed? Solakov is not certain; on the contrary, he interrogates the identity contained in those records, an identity that he suggests cannot be eradicated. Those records contain our lives, a portion of our history and necessary fragments of our

identity. We can observe the West through a telescope, but we still do so with identity papers issued by the People's Republic of Bulgaria, papers that are no longer valid. Although the gaze and the vector of that culture may be drawn to the West, the viewing subject remains fully conscious of his or her actual location, the location of the telescope in the Eastern European city.

The sense of identity formulated in this way is fragile in this part of Europe. During the performance art festival organized in 1993 in Timișoara by Ileana Pintilie, a well-known Romanian artist, Dan Perjovschi, tattooed on his arm the word 'România' (*Romania*, 1993; illus. 216).<sup>54</sup> A year earlier, the same artist had addressed the popular fears of losing Romanian land raised by the state's abandonment of the formerly state-owned (and therefore supposedly now owned by Romanian society) collective farms in an ironic manner. By 'selling' the land in small packages measuring 6 × 8 cm, the artist raised the issue of the tension between the poles marking the transition period. He identified the problem of the conflict with two complementary slogans: 'we want land' and 'we don't want to sell off the common wealth', which evoked the tension between the Socialist myth of so-called common property and the euphoric climate of privatization.<sup>55</sup> During the same festival, another Romanian artist, Teodor Graur, spotlighted another type of common anxiety – fear that Romania (and Eastern Europe as a whole) would be isolated and confined to the living museum of the 'grey zone'. During his performance, the artist, sitting in a cage, repeated into a microphone a sentence in English: 'Hello, I am speaking to you, can you hear me?' He then waited for a response



216. Dan Perjovschi, *Romania*, 1993.

217. subREAL,  
*Draculaland 2*,  
1993.



from a radio tuned to a Western station, which, naturally, never came (*Cage*, 1993). Of course, the absence of a response was in and of itself a form of response. At the beginning of the performance, the artist distributed fliers with the sentence, also in English, that served as the work's subtitle: 'Speaking to Europe from Europe'.<sup>56</sup> However, this 'exchange' had a unidirectional character; the place from which it originated remained – for now – a closed cage.

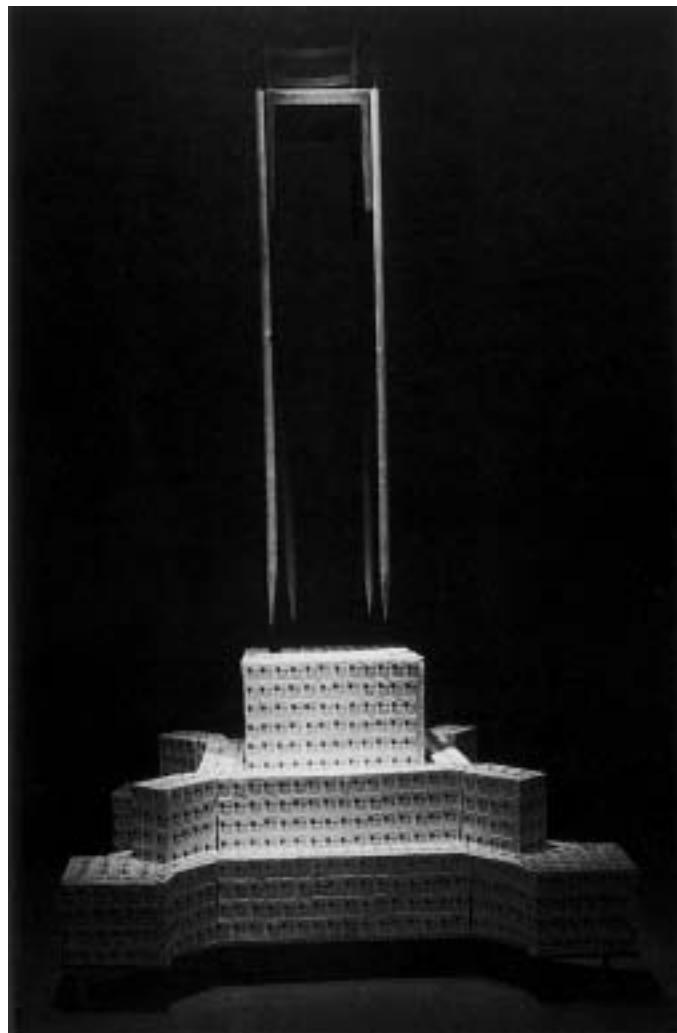
Discussing the dialectics of the place, yet remaining with the Romanian example, it is instructive to examine briefly the group subREAL, one of the most interesting collectives formed in the new Eastern Europe. The artists of subREAL have addressed the problem of the cultural geography of Europe in a

very ironic way. One of their projects, *1000 Artists in Europe* (1991), consisted of two elements. The first was a curtain, 300 × 1700 cm, made from 1,000 condoms; the second consisted of a grid attached to a black, square background made from 1,000 empty condom packages labelled with names of 1,000 living Romanian artists. The condoms were produced by a company called 'Europa'.<sup>57</sup> In a series of works produced under the collective title *Draculaland*, subREAL made numerous references, often ironic and humorous, not so much to the Romanian tradition, as to certain Western stereotypes of Romania. The juxtaposition of the supposedly Transylvanian physiognomy of Prince Dracula with an icon of Western beauty, the portrait of Mona Lisa, made a reference to the Western classic of the avant-garde – Duchamp's altered image of Giaconda – functioned here as an element of a perverse and not quite fully articulated game the artists of the group were playing with Western viewers and their culture (illus. 217). The famous smile of Leonardo's sitter, its mysterious quality mythologized by art history, found here an unexpected explanation. According to the artists of subREAL, it had qualities similar to the vampire's shadow; its significance rested in its absence (*Draculaland 2*, 1993).<sup>58</sup>

In another piece from the same series, entitled *Palace* (illus. 218), shown at the Warsaw Centre for Contemporary Art, located in the Ujazdowski Palace, the Romanian artists linked the venue of their exhibition with another (in)famous palace, the People's Palace, erected in Bucharest by Nicolae Ceaușescu.<sup>59</sup> The construction of the latter palace was a traumatic experience for the Romanians. In order to erect the enormous structure, supposedly second in the world in terms of its overall dimensions, a sizable portion of the old Bucharest had to be razed to the ground. The focus of all available resources on the construction of the Palace led to severe neglect of other parts of that formerly beautiful city, which deteriorated rapidly. The regime spent incredible sums on the project, a fact that created an economic catastrophe in this impoverished country. In order to maintain social discipline, without which such an gigantic architectural project could not be accomplished, the dictator embarked on a campaign of terror not seen since the Stalinist period. The culture, economy and everyday life of Romanians fell victim to the megalomaniac and ill-conceived ambitions of the new incarnation of Dracula. Renata Salecl noted, referencing Freud and Lacan, that the palace became a 'wound' that performed a symbolic function in the process of the formation of a new identity by Romanian society.<sup>60</sup> According to Salecl, the destruction of the city was as significant as the construction of the palace. Such creation *ex nihilo* revealed the death drive. It was located within the symbolic territory of history and the real domain of memory. Its trauma could not be eliminated from the sphere of identity because, as an integral part of history and memory, it invoked

reminiscences of the good, old (pre-traumatic) days, and did not allow one to forget one's own complicity in the creation of the 'new era' symbolized by the palace.

The artists of subREAL raised another important issue. They not only subjected the Romanian national identity, marked by the dialectic of nostalgia and traumatic experience, the wound and identification, to an interrogation, but also identified the regional, geo-historic relationships that could provide the basis for a discussion of an identity that was much broader than a national identity: a shared East European identity. The model of the palace exhibited in Warsaw was constructed from packs of 'Karpaty' ('Carpathians') cigarettes,



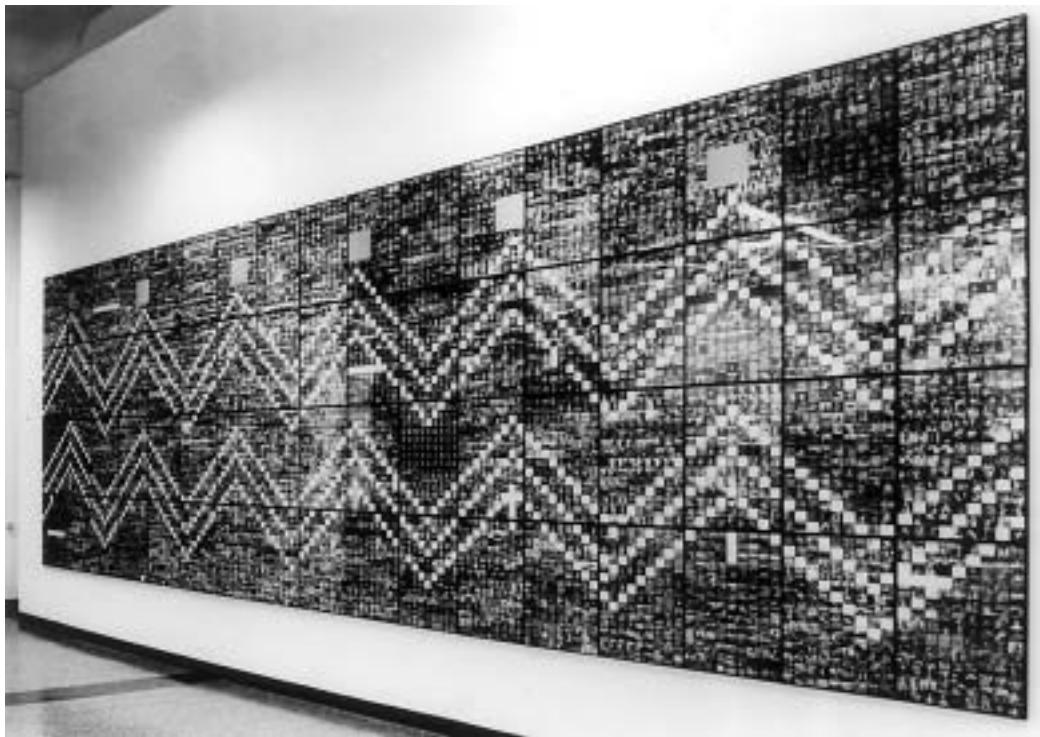
218. subREAL,  
*Castle*, 1995.

which were a very popular black market item in Poland during the period of martial law, when all consumer goods were in short supply.<sup>61</sup> The palace made from ‘Karpaty’ cigarettes represented, therefore, a shared history of Romanians and Poles, brought together by the experience of the Communist terror, economic catastrophes and historic as well as geographic coordinates. It is important to keep in mind that the term ‘Karpaty’ not only identified a brand of cigarettes smuggled into Poland under martial law but also designated the mountain chain that connected the two countries.

Each country, every society, has its own ‘wounds’, traumatic experiences inscribed into the historic processes of its identity formation. If for the Romanians one such wound was the People’s Palace, then for the Poles it was Siberia. For Poles, Siberia functions as a mythological site of national disasters. It defines the political geography of tragedies, repressions and subjugation identified with the nineteenth century, as well as later post-war Soviet occupation. In other words, Siberia, this geographically remote but historically close land, created the negative vector of Polish society’s spatial-temporal identification, and was used as such in the work produced by Zofia Kulik and shown for the first time in Poznan during her one-woman exhibition *From Siberia to Cyberia* (1999).<sup>62</sup>

In the show’s title work, *From Siberia to Cyberia* (illus. 219), ‘Siberia’ refers to the already mentioned geo-historic trauma; ‘Cyberia’ refers, according to the artist, to the name of the first cybercafé in London and as such symbolizes a new dimension of identity. It functions as a metaphor for contemporaneity based in the virtual space of the global village. This juxtaposition raises a key question: does the phonetic similarity suggest a metaphoric one? Or more broadly, does it suggest something about the discussions concerning contemporary Eastern Europe?

*From Siberia to Cyberia* consists of a large tableau composed of over 10,000 small-scale photographs of a television monitor, each showing frames from various television programmes. Many of the photos are extremely significant and function as a key to the understanding of the work. But the interpretation of Kulik’s piece cannot be based on individual frames. It must consider the ‘countless’ number of frames and their seemingly limitless continuity that points to the enormous amount of information provided by television and the massive attack on our sensibility by relentless expansion of visual culture. There is a wide variety of available images, but this diversity is meaningless. What counts is the amount, or rather the volume, that cancels the meaning of individual programmes transmitted by mass media. Moreover, there is no real difference between the individual images in an aesthetic sense; they are dispassionate, black and white photos of a television screen. Of course,



this monotonous procedure is both intentional and significant. It comments on the nature of the television image and its inherent standardization: irrespective of what is actually shown, the same things appear.

The impression of monotony is enhanced by a decorative zigzag that runs lengthwise through the entire work. It suggests that the content of the particular images is not as significant as their uniform character. We often move from programme to programme, surfing channels with the aid of a remote, but, in reality, the images that reach us over the course of several hours are meaningless. We only perceive the 'form' of the visual stream, the dispassionate, standardized and monotonous visuality. The television image is cut off from reality and the enormous amount of information neutralizes any real content. The apparently active viewer (apparently because he can select from among the panoply of international channels) becomes a victim who is passively pressing the button to change a channel. He is victimized by what W.J.T. Mitchell describes as hyper-representation.<sup>63</sup> The television screen was supposed to connect us to the world; in reality it separates us from the world not only by its inherent character, but also by the quantitative explosion of visual information. We experience what Jean Baudrillard referred to as

219. Zofia Kulik,  
*From Siberia  
to Cyberia*,  
1999.

simulacrum. Moreover, this simulation substitutes for the reality; it becomes real thanks to mass information. We inhabit a virtual world where death, terror and war (if they do not affect us directly) are contained by the glass screen. Even those who wage it do not see the actual enemy. They sit in air-conditioned rooms supplied with refrigerators and coffee makers and their view of reality is circumscribed by the cameras mounted on the tips of 'intelligent' missiles.

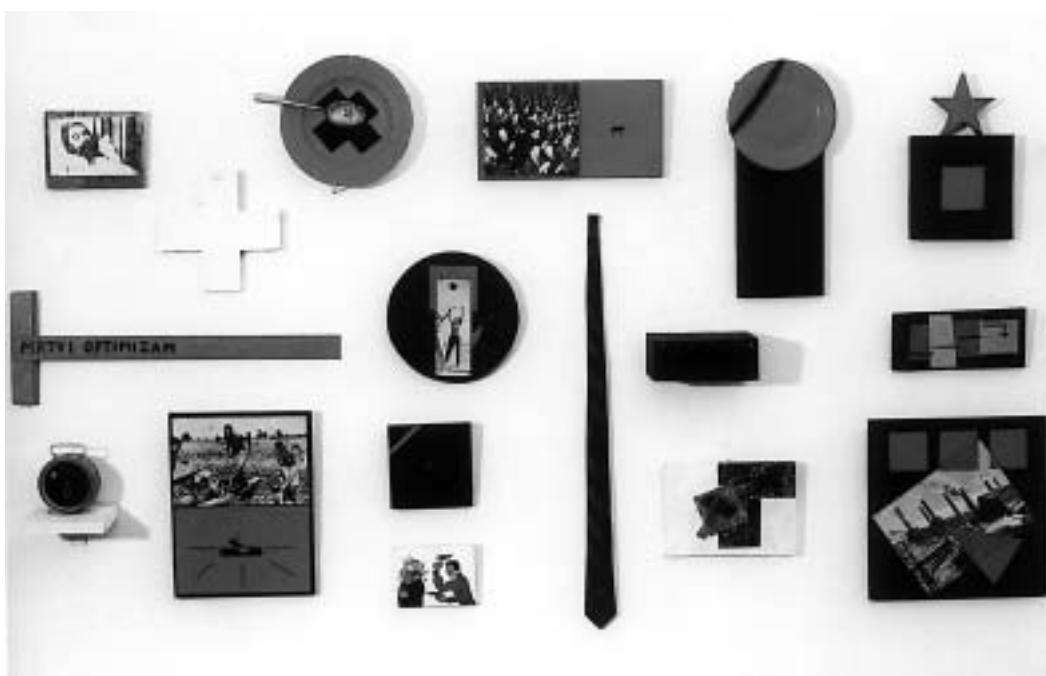
Several times over the last few years we have had an opportunity to view this type of image, an image of reality in the process of its disappearance. We have seen fragments of Eastern Europe in this way, the territories of the former Yugoslavia bombarded by the American air forces in the final decade of the last century during the Balkan wars. Those wars, which came after a series of secessions from the Federation of the former states – Slovenia, Croatia and later Bosnia and Herzegovina – revealed all too well the fact that the dynamics of the historic processes in this part of the continent had a different character from that in other countries of Eastern Europe. The destruction of the Berlin Wall had a much smaller impact on the political and cultural situation in these countries than in the countries under the direct control of the Soviet Empire. For Yugoslavia, the date that marked the beginning of the end was 1980, the year of Marshal Tito's death, the only glue that held Yugoslavia together. The year 1980 was also very significant for the political history of Poland. In Poland it functioned as a prelude signalling coming changes, whereas in Yugoslavia from that moment on the course of history began to move along a different trajectory.

Artists also reacted to those processes, perhaps even more so than in other countries of the region, due to the fact that Yugoslav art of the period often engaged in a critique of the ideology; it was analytic and political. This analytic and critical character was different from the character of Polish art of 'moral indignation' associated with the political opposition of the underground Solidarity and the Catholic Church; it was also different from the alternative, independent Czechoslovak art scene, operating along a parallel track to that occupied by the official culture, but rejecting engagement in politics; it was also different from the subversive, bohemian art of the GDR. Naturally, in Yugoslavia as in the other countries of the region, we can see many artists gravitating towards new expression. In addition to a large number of individuals, there were a number of art groups, such as Alter Imago (Nada Alavanja, Tahir Lušić, Vladimir Nikolić and Mileta Prodanović), or Žestoki (Milovan Marković [De Stil Marković] and Vlasta Mikić), which pursued more or less classical forms of neo-Expressionist painting. According to Ješa Denegri, during the 1980s attitudes towards those forms depended on the artists' status. Despite many international exhibitions showcasing this type of work in

Belgrade, the older artists attempted to reconcile this fashionable stylistic tendency with their own experiences, whereas the younger ones embraced the changes much more enthusiastically.<sup>64</sup> Jadranka Vinterhalter has noted a certain reserve among some artists towards the fashion for neo-Expressionism and has explained it in reference to the strong hold of tradition. In Belgrade in particular, a strong tradition of the critique of painting within neo-avant-garde circles and a tradition of iconoclasm that was deeply rooted and inherited from the previous generation functioned as significant obstacles to wholesale adoption of new expression. The situation in Croatia and Slovenia was much more receptive to new movements, in part, as Vinterhalter points out, because in those areas the tradition of canvas painting was never or not as radically disrupted as it was in Belgrade.<sup>65</sup> In reality, however, the most interesting manifestations of the new relationship to reality cannot be found within the sphere of neo-Expressionist painting. They are found within the realm of critical art.

One of the artists who engaged this type of problematic was Mladen Stilinović, whose work grew out of the experiences of conceptual art.<sup>66</sup> His most characteristic work demonstrating this attitude was the project *Exploitation of the Dead* (illus. 220). The artist explained his choice of the title as 'exploitation of the dead poetics of painting . . . the exploitation of dead signs;

220. Mladen Stilinović,  
*Exploitation of the Dead*,  
1984–90.



for me these signs are dead because they have lost their meaning, or their meaning is so transparent, that it is in fact dead . . . The deadness of the sign is a form of freedom, freedom to handle the sign, freedom to speak in a language free from the terror of the past [sic].<sup>67</sup> The many permutations of Stilinović's work always consisted of a large surface of wall covered with many small paintings, objects, photographs, reproductions and so on of various sizes. To a significant degree, it referenced the stylistic character of Soviet Constructivism, in particular Suprematism and the work of Kazimir Malevich. It also incorporates citations of Socialist Realism, which took on an art-historic rather than an oppositional significance in the context of stylistic references to the Soviet avant-garde, and which took on procedures aimed at creating a visually unified whole, such as a preference for a consistent colour scheme (the red, black and black and white of the photographs). This understanding of the Socialist Realist references was reinforced by the fact that Stilinović tended to look to an early phase of Socialist Realism by referencing the techniques of so-called 'photo-reportage' (also practised by avant-garde artists during the 1930s), rather than the later phase of heroic figurative painting. The amassment of a large collection of symbols (not only situated within the avant-garde tradition, but also taken from Yugoslav everyday life) had the effect of aestheticizing and de-semantizing them. In other words, it deprived them of their specific content and significance, and released them, according to the artist's statement cited earlier, for 'free' use. Marina Gržinić observed that such aesthetization of Communist symbols could be seen in the context of 'post-socialism'.<sup>68</sup> It consisted of using symbols that had lost their ideological and historic meanings and which had become a dead, decorative, visual code. The apparent result of this process was the de-ideologization of Communist symbols and their transformation into gadgets, tourist memorabilia, kitsch, capitalist or semi-capitalist goods offered to tourists in the great cities of Eastern Europe (especially in Berlin) by street vendors. However, the critical weight of this type of art strategy does not reside in its commentary on the commodification of Socialist gadgets, but rather, as Gržinić has noted, in its power to reveal the functioning of ideology, and more broadly in its critique (and analysis) of that ideology. One could say therefore that Stilinović employed the fiction of 'freedom' to use the Communist symbols, since the significance of the symbols was not lost, but rather transformed. A symbol always has meaning, especially a symbol that has a historic character, deeply rooted in the memory and linked with the contemporary manipulation of memory. The artist also succumbed to the illusion of the 'pure aesthetization' of the Communist and, in their particular context, avant-garde past. However, as we have been told by Walter Benjamin, every instance of such 'aesthetization' is itself fundamentally ideological.

Referring to ideological symbols, their deconstruction and demonstration of their ‘emptiness’ brought Stilinović together with the Slovene artists of Neue Slowenische Kunst or NSK, the people who formed the group IRWIN in the 1980s.<sup>69</sup> The history of this interesting collective (Dušan Mandić, Miran Mohar, Andrije Savski, Roman Uranjek and Borut Vogelnik) and the entire circle of NSK (it also included the music group Laibach) is inscribed into the history of disintegrating Yugoslavia. It is also linked to the problematic of another spectre haunting Eastern Europe, the spectre of borders, which haunted the Balkans in a particularly bloody fashion. This can be said in particular with reference to their project *NSK State in Times*, which functions, according to Gržinić, as a spectral apparition of a state. This apparition (as any apparition) is an essential part of the process involved in the production of knowledge about the reality. Gržinić writes (paraphrasing Slavoj Žižek) that in order to understand the ‘real’ reality and to capture it, one must get to know its spectral apparition, which impacts the reality to an extent that is difficult to underestimate.<sup>70</sup>

The history of NSK is closely connected with the fall of the Tito regime and the so-called Slovene syndrome of the 1980s.<sup>71</sup> In the aftermath of Tito’s death, the disintegrating Yugoslav Federal government attempted to keep separatist tendencies in check by introducing much more rigid internal politics, for instance by eliminating the individual republics’ constitutionally conferred rights to limited autonomy. Because Yugoslavia, unlike Czechoslovakia and Poland, had no organized political opposition or dissident circles, it also lacked art that embraced the values formulated by such circles, in particular those values involved in a moral critique of the Communist regime. The function of the East European opposition was taken over in the 1980s by alternative groups such as NSK, which used a very different strategy in dealings with the system of power. They did not engage in a moral critique so much as in a functional analysis of ideology based in the theoretical writing of Slavoj Žižek. The earlier mentioned ‘Slovene syndrome’ was a result of the fact that this republic enjoyed much greater freedom than other parts of Yugoslavia and that its alternative intellectual and art scene was not only particularly productive, but also created an environment that functioned as a substitute for a politically independent life.

The artists of IRWIN, who were initially part of the broader NSK subculture, did not follow the moralizing strategies embraced by many Eastern European dissidents. They were not directly engaged in politics or interested in intervention. Rather, as Gržinić has observed, they created a critical strategy aimed at ‘denaturalizing’ the socialist culture, its rituals and symbols, and deconstructing the Communist ‘politics of viewing’.<sup>72</sup> According to Inke Arns,

the NSK subculture, in general, used the strategy of ‘over identification’ with Communist ideology.<sup>73</sup> This strategy allowed the viewer to confront traumas created by the reality and the past, memory and history. It aimed not just at undermining the power of the Communist symbols by the use of irony and satire, but, and above all, at directing our attention to the fact that those symbols held power over the people and that people submitted to that power. Arns further observed that the IRWIN artists felt that this goal could be only achieved through an analysis of the aesthetic foundations of ideology. Citing Žižek, Arns maintained that this was the most effective method of disarming the ruling ideology, much more effective than moral critique or subversion. When the distance from the ideology is reduced or even eliminated, the ideology becomes defenceless. Its foundation and *jouissance*, which allows for cynical use of ideology as a means to achieve particular benefits and without which no system can function, is threatened. Such cynical proclamations of values, or the lack of faith in that which one declares, allowed those who made them to enjoy the benefits of ideology. That is why the strategy of over-identification is so threatening to the ideology, or rather, to its function within the system of power. It allows for the revealing of the ‘hidden’ values that buttress the system. In other words, it allows one to glimpse the usually invisible ‘lining’ of the ideology.<sup>74</sup>

Such a critical function was performed by the concerts of the group Laibach, full of references to totalitarian ideology, in particular fascism, but also referencing the visual works created by IRWIN by using symbols taken from totalitarian art traditions, including that of the Soviet avant-garde. Arns has described this type of strategy as ‘anti-enlightenment strategy resulting in enlightenment’.<sup>75</sup> The somewhat later series of works *Icons* and their exhibition *Interior of the Planit* (illus. 221) functioned along similar lines. The exhibition was filled with ironic paintings depicting various spaces, often with a totalitarian provenance, related to Malevich’s conception of ‘planits’ and his famous exhibition of the Russian avant-garde ‘0-10 – the Last Futurist Exhibition’, which took place in St Petersburg in 1916. This context also frames the group portrait of the IRWIN artists, *Mystery of the Black Square* (illus. 222).

The most spectacular example of this strategy, located at the juncture between art historic and political discourses, was the performance *Black Square on the Red Square* (1992), which connected the two territories of the twentieth-century history of Eastern Europe: the famous suprematist painting by Malevich and the Moscow Red Square in front of the Kremlin, the heart of the Soviet empire. The event took place on the occasion of a meeting between IRWIN and artists of the Moscow-based Apt-Art group. The two groups issued a joint declaration that underscored the importance of the issue of East



221. IRWIN,  
*Interior of the  
Planit*, 1996,  
Ludwig  
Museum,  
Budapest.



222. IRWIN,  
*Mystery of the  
Black Square*,  
1995.

223. IRWIN,  
Moscow  
Declaration,  
1992, courtesy  
IRWIN.



## MOSCOW DECLARATION

Moscow, 20<sup>th</sup> May 1992

1. We, the artists and critics from 12 countries and elsewhere who gathered in Moscow on May 20, 1992 on the occasion of the Art-Art and IRWIN project 1992, Embassies, inscribe the following declaration:
- A. The history, experience and time and space of Eastern countries of the 20th century cannot be forgotten, hidden, repressed or denied.
- B. The history of East does not exist separately, the Eastern dimension can only be fully understood by reflecting on the whole which has to be integrated in a matrix with its changed present and future.
- C. This common history, this experience and the time and space have created the atmosphere for a specific subjectivity that we must in developing, form, and refine a subjectivity that reflects the past and future.
- D. This common history, this experience and cultural attitude is common to all of us and has a polymorph - not specifically Eastern - importance and meaning.
- E. The condition of this common subjectivity is an easy individual but feelings in the social, political and cultural experiences, identity and physiognomy of Europe as a whole.
- F. The experience of oppressive regimes (totalitarian, authoritarian), based in all countries, has created a shared history, a common memory to more than half of the population. This is our small experience.
- G. This common undeveloped subjectivity can still base for our new identity which is taking a clear shape later in the form of new social, political, and cultural internationalism in the last decades of this century.

2. This text should have the following practical goals:

- A. To officially mark the birth of this new consciousness which is in the process of becoming and maturing.
- B. To implement and materialize suppressed ideas in reality through a formation of new infrastructures, a two-way communication and a new spectrum of information.
- C. To create an open-to-world one corresponds with the principles of this declaration.

Karl Balakrishnan (Signature)

Rita Colom (Signature)

Wojciech Górecki (Signature)

Oleg Khvostov (Signature)

Ivana Černá Mančík, Milena Mátová, Andrej Števlik, Roman Drapala, Božena Vrabelová

Elza Karkashova (Signature)

Georgy Lukaševič (Signature)

Vlado Mikuš (Signature)

David Pajer (Signature)

Konstantin Zvezdochkin (Signature)

## NSK Embassies, Consulates, Pavilion

PRUD'HOMME NSK

IRWIN

XLV BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

Courtesy of IRWIN Biennale di Venezia, Accademia di Venezia, 1992

European identification, identity based on a shared history, shared time-space of Eastern Europe, shared experience of oppressive regimes, as well as totalitarian and authoritarian political systems, which created a clearly defined context for the developing regional subjectivity. The *Moscow Declaration* also stated that East European political and cultural heritage had universal dimensions and defined the physiognomy of Europe as a whole (illus. 223). Without it Europe could not be Europe, since it could not be fully defined.<sup>76</sup> The declaration served as a reminder of the importance of the diversity of locations, of the necessity of a pluralistic definition of the art geography of the twentieth century, and about the multi-vector function of the continental tensions.

Coming to Moscow, the artists of IRWIN created an embassy of NSK, which was an incarnation of the *NSK State in Time*, a state without a territory, consisting only of mobile 'citizens'. This state described by Gržinić as an apparition does have, however, an insignia and does issue passports (illus. 224).<sup>77</sup> The entire project was built on the framework provided by Žižek's theoretical writings about the tragedy of the old Yugoslavia and Europe, which consisted of the dissolution of the state structures and the rise of ethnic interests and national-territorial claims.<sup>78</sup> Žižek concluded that one had to get rid of nationalisms as well as anarchistic or anarcho-liberal ideas of stateless societies. The only guarantee of safety rested in the reinforcement of the state and of the abstract and artificial structures of power that undermined the ideology of rootedness, nation, and 'organic', ethnic ties. *The NSK State in Time* is the embodiment of this utopia. As such, it is, according to Arns, 'suprematist', or defined by other than 'normal' categories – not territory, but time and movement.<sup>79</sup>

One should inquire at this point whether the Slovene artists did not inscribe themselves into the strategy of the centre of power (and therefore the strategy of the West), or a strategy of globalization, a strategy that enhances the power of the West by neutralizing spatial relations? Confirmation of those suspicions could be based on the fact that the structures of postmodern globalism and multiculturalism willingly embrace the categories of dislocation,



224 IRWIN,  
NSK State  
in Time –  
Diplomatic  
Passport.

thereby masking the character of the place. Moreover, as Paul Virilio has noted, one could say that in contrast to the old ‘tyranny of distance’, the tensions between the global and the local, or the transnational and the national, which until now have characterized the world, there has appeared a new tyranny, ‘tyranny of real time’ associated with the coming of the new world order based on ‘speed’.<sup>80</sup> The idea of the ‘state in time’ could function as a perfect embodiment of this conception. However, approaching the analysis of IRWIN from a perspective of critical geography, within which there are no voices belonging to no-one (a fact that has been noted by other critical discourses, postcolonial, feminist, etc.) or that come from nowhere, we can define the issue in a different way. This critical perspective demands that we ascertain not only who speaks but also from what location. Every statement is made from a particular position. The discourse of the virtual reality of ‘Cyberia’ comes from the centre; the conception of the dislocation of the subject is, likewise, formulated within the metropolis. The juxtaposition of that discourse with its source and its analysis according to geographic categories reveals a utopia that *de facto* functions as the strategy of the centre, that is, the West. On the other hand, the statement by IRWIN comes out of a region marked by a painful experience of space. An invention of a state without a nation or a territory, and therefore without ethnic definitions and borders, could be seen as a response to the political situation in the Balkans or bloody ethnic wars conducted within the territories of the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, or at least can be interpreted within those frames of reference.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, it is important to note that this state was conceptualized in a place excluded from the territory occupied by ‘Europe without Borders’, a place barred from the European Union and a place that experienced the economic and cultural effects of that exclusion. *The nsk State in Time* advocated by IRWIN reveals the hypocrisy of the universalist Modernist discourse, or more precisely of the promise of ‘the common European home’ formulated during the Cold War and détente, as well as the hierarchic character of the idea of the multicultural ‘global village’.

The final solution to the puzzle of the meaning of the Slovene artists’ work is suggested by the meaning and status of their utopia, conceived not according to abstract categories of philosophical discourse, but rather from the perspective of critical geography. This utopia is invoked not to mask any power, hierarchy or political, technological, cultural or military supremacy. On the contrary, the utopia is invoked in order to reveal that power. Moreover, the juxtaposition of geography with art history that is clearly advocated by the artists of IRWIN reveals an even deeper meaning. The numerous art utopias created in Eastern Europe that envisioned various non-places have always remained in conflict with the regimes, even though at times they appeared to collaborate

with them. For instance, if one looks at the example of Malevich, as suggested by IRWIN, what becomes apparent is the fact that although his work created a utopia of the future in a different way from the strategy used by the Slovene artists, it also unmasked the use of ideology by the Bolshevik regime and as such was firmly situated in the present. In fact, contrary to the suggestion made by IRWIN, Malevich located his *Planits* within the context of a Communist discourse, revealing (consciously or not, but that is a different issue) a cynical attitude towards Bolshevik ideology. After all, the Bolsheviks had no intention of erecting avant-garde architectural structures, preferring sorealist ones instead.

This conflict with systems of power, both narrowly as well as broadly conceived, differentiates East European utopias from those created in the West (technological utopias, alternative societies, ecological ones, the ‘global village’ and so on), which, in the end, always find a common language with the systems of power, or even, as in the case of ‘Cyberia’, function as their ideology. Following this argument, one could make the observation that East European utopias were never threatened with realization and materialization, in the way that we are today, according to Andreas Huyssen (backed by the authority of Baudrillard), witnessing the realization of the utopian vision of the ‘global village’.<sup>82</sup> Paradoxically, this danger is quite serious from an epistemological point of view since the fulfilment of a utopia is synonymous with the loss of an external reference point necessary for the description of reality. In order to actually define, describe and consider that reality, we must have such an external anchor; in order to be understood, a place must be rendered relative through a reference to a non-place, a u-topia, or it risks becoming ungraspable.

The earlier mentioned relationship between the spectre and the reality is apparent here as well; the reality is unreadable, unknowable without its spectralization. The spectral apparition of a state allows one to understand the state as such. In the context of discussions about utopia, in particular about the utopia of globalization based on the concepts of time and speed, the location, the place from which one speaks, is very important. Let me reiterate this point once more: according to critical geography there are no voices that do not have particular ownership and there are no voices that do not have particular locations. The artists of IRWIN do not speak from a position of a virtual metropolis, but rather from Ljubljana, a relatively small city located on the margins of Europe.

That is why their utopia has critical character. It is doomed to engage in conflict and confrontation with the system of power, the Western centre. Paradoxically, their project of the ‘spectral state’ reveals the importance of space by giving up the idea of territoriality; it discloses the ideological character of the

seeming geographic transparency of globalization and the comfort of visuality that masks the workings of power in the contemporary multicultural world. The conflict that ensures the critical character of the *NSK State in Time* utopia is guaranteed by its foundational assumptions. Considered from this perspective, the criticality of IRWIN's project is unavoidable, just as the existence of the *NSK* passports makes conflict with the 'reality' of the European Union unavoidable. Without much risk of being proven incorrect, one could state that no guard stationed on the 'external border' of 'Europe without Borders' would allow a citizen of the 'state in time' using the *NSK* passport to enter into the European Union.<sup>83</sup> The passport (unnecessary when one crosses the purely administrative internal borders of the EU) becomes in the context of such a confrontation a clear, absurdist and contrarian metaphor of contemporary Europe.

One of the key problems of contemporary Europe viewed not from the perspective of the centre but from that of the margins, in this case Eastern Europe (which is still in part attempting to join the European Union), is the problem of borders. The borders have become the next East European spectre. Moreover, for those countries of Eastern Europe that have not yet applied to join the EU, the issue of borders is highly problematic, since the borders between the united Europe and the excluded Europe transgress the middle of Eastern Europe and could easily turn into new curtains and barriers.

IRWIN's project *NSK State in Time* explores this problematic of borders and, to use Jacques Derrida's words, reveals their 'aporetic' character. Emphasizing the 'dual conception of borders', Derrida applied this problem directly to Europe. The concept of aporia reveals simultaneously the crossing and non-crossing of borders. If a border is something to be crossed, it can also become something that cannot be crossed. Those two terms are not necessarily opposites; rather, by being juxtaposed, they reveal the logic of many possibilities. In other words, aporia is the essence of the concept of the border. To describe the 'aporetic quality of borders', Derrida used two examples that described their ambivalence perfectly. 'In one case', writes Derrida, 'the nonpassage resembles an impermeability; it would stem from the opaque existence of an uncrossable border'.<sup>84</sup> This was the condition of the Wall, the border of Europe until 1989 and, eventually, will be the condition of the future border of the newly divided continent. When the Berlin Wall stood, everyone could experience its function as the border; however, no one, especially no citizen of the GDR, could cross it 'in practice'. Even citizens of the other more liberal Eastern Bloc countries could not cross it without the necessary manoeuvres required by strict passport control. 'In another case', continued Derrida, 'nonpassage stems from the fact that there is no limit. There is not yet or there is no longer a border'.<sup>85</sup> That is

the situation within the united Europe where internal borders have been virtually eliminated; it is also the situation in the former GDR and in the reunited Berlin, where the citizens ‘all of a sudden’ stopped experiencing uncrossability not only of the internal border but also of the European borders as such; and it is the condition awaiting the countries that applied for admission to the European Union.

The experience of borders and of their aporetic character constitutes a pressing problem for the ‘grey zone’ of Europe, a region that emerged out of the former Eastern Bloc in the wake of its disintegration. The spectre haunting the region has been connected on the one hand with the political demarcation of territories, some through bloody and violent processes (as the recent experiences of the Balkans has amply demonstrated), and on the other with the demarcation of the territories belonging to the centre, in this instance to the European Union, a drawing up of the borders of exclusion. The IRWIN project *NSK State in Time*, as no other work in contemporary European culture, reveals the aporetic character of the borders, their pluralistic logic. By creating a spectral state, IRWIN not only demonstrated the spectral quality of its borders, but also of the actual borders. Just as the spectre is necessary for the perception of reality, so the spectralization of borders becomes necessary for the perception of their aporetic character in Europe at the turn of the century. It is necessary for us to convince ourselves that globalization, which assumes spatial transparency, the annihilation of geography, the unification of the ‘global village’ and the elimination of the power of the centre, is nothing more than a fiction.



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## INTRODUCTION

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- 43 Petrová, *Nová figurace*. The basic information about Czech new figuration comes from this work.
- 44 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting', in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York, 1984), pp. 107–35.
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- ## 6 THE CRITIQUE OF PAINTING: TOWARDS THE NEO-AVANT-GARDE
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- 2 Bojana Pejić, 'Sozialistischer Modernismus und die Nachwehen', in *Aspekte/Positionen: 50 Jahre Kunst aus Mitteleuropa, 1949–1999*, ed. Lóránd Hegyi (Vienna, 1999), pp. 115–24.
- 3 Nena Dimitrijević, *Gorgona* (Zagreb, 1977). See also Marija Gattin, ed., *Gorgona Gorgonesco Gorgonico* (Venice and Zagreb, 1997).

- 4 Sue Cramer, [no title] in *The Horse who Sings: Radical Art from Croatia*, ed. Sue Cramer and Branka Stipančić (Sydney, 1993), p. 3.
- 5 Mladen Stilinović, conversation with Dimitrije Bašicević, 'Mangelos', in *Rijeci i Slike/ Words & Images*, ed. Stipančić, p. 65.
6. See Branka Stipančić, 'Artists' Books & Magazines', in *The Horse who Sings*, ed. Cramer and Stipančić, repr. in *Rijeci i Slike/ Words & Images*, ed. Stipančić.
- 7 Cramer, [no title], p. 2.
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- 9 Ibid. In this publication, slightly different versions of the text appear on different pages. In particular, see the difference between the text as it appears in the background essay and in the documents section.
- 10 Stipančić, 'Rijeci i Slike/Words & Images', p. 17.
- 11 Original text in English. Cited by Dimitrijević, *Gorgona*, np.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid. Dimitrijević does not provide a date for the project, however, it is likely that it was created before 1966 when the group ended, or three years before Seth Sigelaub's 'exhibition'.
- 15 Stilinović, conversation with Bašicević, 'Mangelos', p. 65.
- 16 Ibid., p. 55.
- 17 Branka Stipančić, *Dimitrije Bašicević Mangelos* (Zagreb, 1990), p. 13.
- 18 Ibid., p. 15.
- 19 Stilinović, conversation with Bašicević, 'Mangelos', p. 64. Dates for some of Mangelos's works remain problematic.
- 20 Ibid., p. 57.
- 21 Branka Stipančić, 'Artists' Books & Magazines', in *Rijeci i Slike/Words & Images*, ed. Stipančić, p. 121.
- 22 Leonida Kovač, 'The Negation of its own Negation', in *Rijeci i Slike/ Words & Images*, ed. Stipančić, p. 67.
- 23 Stipančić, *Dimitrije Bašicević Mangelos*, pp. 14, 16.
- 24 Original text in English. Ibid., p. 13.
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- 26 Igor Zabel, 'оho – From Reism to Conceptual Art', in *оho: Retrospektiva/Eine Retrospektive/A Retrospective*, ed. Igor Zabel (Ljubljana, 1994). See also Tamaž Brejc, 'оho as an Artistic Phenomenon, 1966–1971', in *The New Art Practice in Yugoslavia, 1966–1978*, ed. Marijan Susovski (Zagreb, 1978); Croatian edition, *Nova umjetnicka praksa, 1966–1978* (Zagreb, 1978).
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- 31 Igor Zabel, 'David Nez, Kosmologija/Cosmology 1969', in *Body and the East*, ed. Zdenka Badovinac (Ljubljana, 1998), p. 178.
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- 34 Jerzy Ludwiński, 'Włodzimierz Borowski – podróz do świata nieskończonych małości', in *Włodzimierz Borowski: Ślady/traces, 1956–1995*, ed. Jarosław Kozłowski (Warsaw, 1996), p. 14.
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- 43 Grzegorz Sztabiński, 'Między naturą a kulturą. O 'działaniach neutralnych' Jęzegrogo Rosołowicza', in *Jerzy Rosołowicz, 1928–1982*, ed. Gorzadek, p. 18.
- 44 Borowski, *Tadeusz Kantor*, p. 23.
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- 79 Original text in English. Cited by Palvína Morganová, ‘Czech Action Art in the 1960s Press’, in *Akce, Slovo, Pohyb, Prostor*, ed. Havránek, p. 366.
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- 81 Milan Knižák, 'Odpovědi na otázky galerie výtvarného umění v Litoměřicích', in *Nová Citlivost*, ed. J. Hlaváček, text volume, pp. 8–9.
- 82 Jindřich Chalupecký, *Nové umění w Čechach* (Prague, 1994).
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- 84 Vladimir Borecký, 'Briciovy kapitulace a rekapitulace', in *Výtvarné umění*, III (1991) Karel Srp, 'Toto není happening, ale . . .', pp. 35/361.
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- 33 Ibid., pp. 108–13.
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- 1971: *Prekrocrnie hranic* (Žilina, 1994). The work was written in 1971 and initially appeared in a samizdat form. Ivan Jancar, ‘Happening a Performance’, in *Šesťdesiate roky v slovenskom výtvarnom umení*, ed. Rusinová; Vlasta Ciháková-Noshiro, ed., *Umení Akce* (Prague, 1991); Palvína Morganová, *Akenci umení* (Olomouc, 1999); Karel Srp, ‘Toto není happening, ale . . .’/‘This is Not a Happening, but . . .’, in *Akce, Slovo, Pohyb, Prostor/Action, Word, Movement, Space*, ed. Havránek, pp. 28–53, 358–65; Rusinová, ed., *Umienie akcie, 1965–1989* (Bratislava, 2001). Czechoslovak performance art is often also included in such survey texts. See Elisabeth Jappe, *Performance, Ritual, Prozess: Handbuch der Aktionskunst in Europa* (Munich, 1993); Paul Schimmel, ed., *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979* (Los Angeles, CA, 1998).
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- 63 Overy, *Paul Neagu*, pp. 51–6.
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- 65 Ibid., pp. 26, 33–4.
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- 68 Martin Damus, *Malerei der DDR: Funktionen der bildenden Kunst im Realen Sozialismus* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg, 1991), p. 246 nn. See also Hubertus Gabner and Eckhart Gillen, eds, *Kultur und Kunst in der DDR seit 1970* (Lahn-Gieben, 1977).
- 69 Rüdiger Thomas, 'Selbst-Behauptung', in *Jenseits des Staatskultur: Traditionen autonomer Kunst in der DDR*, ed. Gabriele Muschter and Rüdiger Thomas (Munich, 1992), p. 11.
- 70 See also Damus, *Malerei der DDR*, pp. 295 nn; Rüdiger Thomas, 'Selbst-Behauptung', in *Jenseits des Staatskultur*, ed. Muschter and Thomas, pp. 26 nn.; Kaiser and Petzold, *Boheme und Diktatur in der DDR*, pp. 52–9. It is worth noting an interesting coincidence of dates in the founding of the different East European oppositional movements. At approximately the same time, the Committee for the Defence of Workers was forming in Poland. This organization would give rise to a series of different associations whose growth would eventually lead to the founding of Solidarity. In Czechoslovakia, Charter '77 came into existence. Although this oppositional movement of intellectuals may not have had immediate effect on the self-organization of the society, it did play a significant role as an agent of moral and intellectual resistance to the 'normalization'.
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- 78 Blume, ‘In freier Luft – Die Künstlergruppe Clara Mosch und Ihre Pleinairs’.
- 79 Henry Schumann, ‘Reading Carlfriedrich Claus’ Sprachblätter’, in *German Art from Beckmann to Richter: Images of a Divided Country*, ed. Eckhart Gillen (Cologne and Berlin, 1997), p. 289.
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- 8 CONCEPTUAL ART  
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