

Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde

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Art since 1900, a study published recently by several prominent art historians connected with the *October* quarterly, is definitely one of the best available overviews of 20th-century art.¹ The ample artistic material covered in the book has been ordered chronologically decade by decade, with each year approached in terms of its major events presented not so much as autonomous incidents, but as aspects of the intellectual processes characteristic of a given period. In a few instances the historical narrative is interrupted by “round table” debates among the authors. The analyses adopt the most recent methods of research, in many cases developed by the authors themselves. Moreover, each segment of the book has been supplemented by an appropriate reading list and crossreferences to other parts, which offer the reader a chance to follow specific artistic processes, series of events, as well as the evolution of individual artists – “above”, as it were, the subsequent narrative pieces. The book closes with a glossary of 20th-century art, an index, and an enormous bibliography. All in all, *Art since 1900* is an excellent textbook to be used at an academic level, virtually indispensable for the study of 20th-century art; perfectly clear and written in the present idiom of art history. The question which I am going to raise here pertains, however, to geography.

There is absolutely no doubt that *Art since 1900* is a textbook focusing on Western art – the art produced in the cultural and political centers of the West: Paris, Berlin, Vienna, London, New York, and others. This does not mean, though, that no examples of the art created outside the West or on its margins are mentioned. Apart from Russia and the role of Moscow and St. Petersburg (or Petrograd), the reader will find information on selected problems of 20th-century art in Brazil, Mexico, and Japan, as well as in Central, Southern and Northern Europe. It is perhaps the first

¹ Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900. Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, London 2004.

publication affording such a wide scope and expanding the artistic geography of the last century. This is particularly important, since it is intended as an academic textbook.

The problem is, however, that *Art since 1900* does not revise the tacit assumptions of modernist artistic geography and that it ignores the perspective of critical geography² as well as what Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann calls “geohistory”.³ As a result it fails to reveal the historical significance of the space and place where specific art works were actually produced. In other words, *Art Since 1900* refuses to deconstruct the relations between the center and the margins in the world history of modern art. The group of art historians to which the authors of this book used to belong has done much to revise the paradigm of art historical studies, founding their project of a critical art history on inspiration drawn from social sciences, feminism, queer theory, etc. Still, the authors of *Art Since 1900* have made no attempt to critique the modernist artistic geography and have not revised its premises in their own critical methodology. Consequently, the art produced outside the centers of Western Europe and the United States are described within, as it were, the Western paradigm.

The main exception in this context is the case of Russia whose influence on the development of the worldwide (Western) avant-garde cannot be overrated and whose role has been distinctly highlighted in the book. This is, however, nothing new, as the history of the first, great Russian avant-garde has been part of the Western canon of 20th-century art at least since the times of Alfred Barr. Hence, its inclusion in any historical narrative is not so much an innovation as simply an obligation. The arts from other peripheral regions, however, are presented as fragments of the global or universal art history established in the West, which reveals both this book’s West-centric approach to art history, and the dominance of the premises of modernist art geography in general.

These premises add up to a type of art historical narrative which I call “vertical”. This vertical narrative implies a certain hierarchy. The heart of modern art is the center – a city or cities – where the paradigms of the main artistic trends came into being: Berlin, Paris, Vienna, London, New

² Critical geography is an approach opposed to traditional *Kunstgeographie*, understood as an essential concept of relationship between place and culture (*Blut und Boden*); critical geography, thus, along with other critical discourses (e.g. feminism, cultural studies etc.), destabilizes the relation between the subject and place, and recognizes it as a construction.

³ Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art*, Chicago-London 2004; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, “Introduction”, in: Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann and Elizabeth Philiod (eds.), *Time and Place: Essays in the Geohistory of Art*, London 2005.

York. From those centers particular models come to the periphery, radiating all over the world. Put differently, from within certain nations those models are subsequently internationalised. Hence, the art of the center determines a specific paradigm, while the art of the periphery is supposed to adopt the models established in the centers. The center provides canons, hierarchy of values, and stylistic norms – it is the role of the periphery to adopt them in a process of reception. It may happen, of course, that the periphery has its own outstanding artists, but their recognition, or art historical consecration, depends on the center: on exhibitions organized in the West and books published in Western countries. That was what happened to the outstanding Polish constructivists, Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński, and to Czech surrealists such as Toyen and Jindřich Štyrský. Naturally, their contemporaries recognized them as their peers – for instance, in his lecture given on March 29, 1935 in Prague, André Breton said that surrealism was developing in Paris and in Prague in two parallel ways.⁴ Significantly, then, the artists of the international avant-garde did not view the art scene from a vertical perspective: to the dadaists, Bucharest or Tokyo were no less important than Berlin or Zurich. It was only art history which developed the hierarchical, vertical discourse ordering the artistic geography in terms of centers and peripheries. To refer to dadaism once again, let me mention the excellent history of dada edited by Stephen Foster: among its several volumes, volume four provides information on whatever appeared outside the (Western) centers. The title of this volume is quite telling: *The Eastern Dada Orbit*. In this volume one finds the accounts of the dada movement in Eastern and Central Europe, as well as in Japan,⁵ which, strikingly, implies that whatever is outside the center is “Eastern”, the East apparently stretching from Prague to Tokyo. It would thus seem that vertical art history implies an “orientalization” of the culture of Others in the sense proposed by Edward Said.⁶

In world art history one can find some successful attempts to create alternative narratives that more aptly bring into scope the history of

⁴ See František Šmejkal, “From Lyrical Metaphors to Symbols of Fate: Czech Surrealism in the 1930s”, in: Jaroslav Anděl *et al.* (ed.), *Czech Modernism, 1900-1945*, Houston 1989, 65-83, here 65.

⁵ Stephen C. Foster (ed.), *Crisis and the Arts. The History of Dada*, Vol. IV: Gerald Janecek and Toshiharu Omuka (eds.), *The Eastern Dada Orbit: Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Central Europe, and Japan*, New York 1998. Of course there are some other studies focusing on Eastern Europe in particular as a place of the origins of dada movement. See, for instance, Tom Sandqvist, *Dada East. The Romanians of Cabaret Voltaire*, Cambridge, Mass. 2006.

⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1979.

modern art in the margins. One of these, conceived not in terms of a single case study but as an overview of a large non-Western area, is John Clark's *Modern Asian Art*.⁷ Clark has drawn a detailed picture of modern art in Asia in relation to the culture of the West, which he calls "Euramerica", and has noted little knowledge of his subject matter in the West. This lack of knowledge does not, however, stem merely from the differences in the cultural policies of specific countries, but from much more profound cultural processes going on in particular locations. In fact, Clark claims, the "Euramerican" influence is only one element which a historian interested in the region must take into consideration. Another element is the inner dynamics of a given culture, its selective needs to adopt specific models, and the role played by cultural "transfers" in particular countries. In other words, Clark is interested not so much in the reflection of Western modern art in Asia, but rather in the ways in which that art and its institutions are made to function in a given Asian context. Paradoxically, a Western art style is very often used as an instrument of resistance against the cultural colonialism and imperial domination of the West in different forms of neo-traditionalist art, which makes the picture of the local situation even more complicated. The same goes for the differentiation of art and the rise of local schools of "Western style". Clark's view is thus a much more dynamic conception of the reception of modern art in Asia than the ones usually found in Western textbooks of art history. According to Clark, the artist, the work, and the culture of a given country should be seen as "actors" rather than "fields" in which Western influences appear.⁸ Actors rather than fields: this metaphorical shift goes to the core of the issue I wish to address here.

However, in terms of the "orientalization" of the Other and its art history, successfully deconstructed by Clark, the positioning of the non-Western, or non-European, differs a lot from that of Central or Eastern Europe. The non-European "Other" is a real "Other", while the Central or Eastern European Other is a "not-quite-Other" or a "close Other".⁹ This, of course, has not always been so, as evidenced in a study by Larry Wolff, which illustrates that to the people of the Enlightenment someone from Eastern Europe (a Lithuanian, a Pole or a Russian) still seemed a

⁷ John Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, Honolulu 1998.

⁸ Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, 22.

⁹ The term "close Other" is used by Bojana Pejić in her essay "The Dialectics of Normality", in: Bojana Pejić and David Elliott (eds.), *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, Stockholm 1999, 116-28, here 120. She mentions Boris Groys (*fremde Nähe*), but makes no bibliographic reference.

“real Other” indeed.¹⁰ In modern culture, however, the place of the “close Other” is on the margins of European culture, outside the center but still within the same cultural frame of reference, while the place of the “real Other” is determined not by the strategy of marginalization, but by that of colonization.

The problem with the arts in the marginalized regions of Europe, in comparison to the other, non-Western parts of the world, especially after 1945, is that they remained somehow *in* Europe. Although they were dominated by the Soviet Union, they remained European, though their contact with the arts of the West was quite difficult; the artists remained European, though they hardly enjoyed the freedom of traveling from country to country, especially on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Consequently, writing from the “vertical” perspective, art historians were for a long time unable to reveal the meanings of the artistic culture in East-Central Europe, which developed in different ways in specific countries, although, for instance, geographically East Berlin was located just steps away from the West. In order to write a history of the arts of the region, historians were forced to focus on the political context of the reception of Western art models, which often radically changed their original meaning: *informel* meant something else in Poland than in France, a happening had other meanings in Czechoslovakia than in the US, and conceptual art in Hungary was not the same as conceptual art in the United Kingdom. Context-building, a sort of “framing” in the sense given to this term by Norman Bryson,¹¹ therefore became an indispensable element of the analytical expertise of the art historian in this part of Europe. Historical differences and a strong pressure of politics on art, regardless of its direct influences (paradoxically, such a pressure often resulted in radical depoliticization of art), may as such ultimately provoke the thesis, to quote Hans Belting, of the “two voices of the history of European art”.¹² One voice, according to Belting, is Western art history, the second one is Eastern European. Still, if this postulate is taken too literally, it may lead to errors in the interpretation of historical processes, that is, misunderstanding, interpretation outside the contextual, historical or geographical premises.¹³

¹⁰ Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, Stanford 1994.

¹¹ Norman Bryson, “Art in Context”, in: Ralph Cohen (ed.), *Studies in Historical Change*, Charlottesville 2003, 18-42, here 21.

¹² Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, Chicago-London 2003, 61.

¹³ See Mária Orišková, *Dvojhlásné dejiny umenia*, Bratislava 2002.

However, and quite significantly, although the meanings of art in East-Central Europe were different from those in the West, art in East-Central Europe kept developing within the orbit of Western culture. What is more, aspirations to remain part of Western culture played the role of a political remedy against the official cultural policies of the communist regimes, since the communists wanted to keep East European culture outside Western influences, and within the allegedly self sufficient Eastern Bloc.¹⁴ Therefore, the task is not to provide the “other voice of art history” (that is, Belting’s non-Western voice, from Eastern or Central Europe), but to establish another paradigm of writing art history.

The “horizontal” history of the European avant-garde, which I will propose presently, may well provide that other paradigm. I would like to sketch its basic principles (some of which are widely used already today). A horizontal art history should begin with the deconstruction of vertical art history, that is, the history of Western art. A critical analysis should reveal the speaking subject: who speaks, on whose behalf, and for whom? This is not to cancel Western art history, but to call this type of narrative by its proper name, precisely as a “Western” narrative. In other words, I aim to separate two concepts which have usually been merged: the concept of Western modern art and the concept of universal art. Western art history can thus be relativized and placed next to other art historical narratives – in accordance with the horizontal paradigm. The consequence of such a move will be a reversal of the traditional view of the relationship between the art history of the margins and that of “our” art history (read: of the West).

While it seems obvious that the modern art of the margins developed under the influence of the West, it appears much less obvious to ask how the developments in non-Western art affected the history of Western art or, more precisely, the perception of Western art. Here, then, a question arises: how does marginal art change the perception of the art of the center? How is the center perceived, not from the center itself – the place usually occupied by the historian of modern art – but from a marginal position?

For starters, the marginal observer sees that the center is cracked. If the center perceives itself as homogeneous, then the periphery, in the process of its reception and transformation of the center for its own use, will spot inner tensions which are, as it were, essential. It would seem that there are two categories which homogenize art history written from the

¹⁴ Piotr Piotrowski, *Awangarda w cieniu Jalty. Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945-1989*, Poznań 2005.

point of view of the center: the canon, and the style, in the sense of given art movements, such as cubism and futurism. The history of the art of the margins, defined both in terms of artistic events, and in terms of their description and analysis, has been developing in the context of the Western canon and stylistics. First artists, and then art historians, refer in their creative and analytical experience to those categories. The Western canon of a given movement becomes a point of reference for its reception and transformation in specific locations outside the center. This is, however, not so much a question of judgment, but rather a historical frame, a context for more or less autonomous operations which, under the pressure of many local circumstances, generate their own hierarchies and canons. Such local art canons cannot be agreed upon, since there is no single history of the art of the margins. There are as many histories as there are margins. Still, such histories can be negotiated, particularly from the critical perspective of a common opposition to the center. If, however, the canon emerges as relative when seen from the margins, the conclusion may well be that it should also be relativized in the center. Art historians should realize that a canon is always an effect of an analytical and historical construction – more dependent on the historian than on the art accounted for. This holds even more true when it comes to style. In fact, the art of the margins and its histories never accepted the Western “purity” of style. There are plenty of examples – Russian cubo-futurism (its very name marks it as heterogeneous), Hungarian activism, Polish formism and Moscow conceptual art, to mention just a few – and the conclusions to be drawn from them are quite obvious. Returning to the center with the experience of the margins, we realize that for instance conceptual art in the West was not so orthodox or homogeneous either, and that the linguistic model as an analytical category derived from the activity of the *Art and Language* group does not include a number of manifestations. In short, the art history of the center, as well as the global history of modern art developed from it, have the opportunity to revise their self-perception as a result of studies focused on the margins, informed by a horizontal history of the avant-garde.

Relativization of Western art history in consequence of, among other procedures, the deconstruction of its analytical and geographical categories, as well as the “localization” of the center, must bring about similar processes in marginal art history. The latter must also take a fresh look at itself, define its position, and the place from which it speaks. In fact, its position is much more privileged in this respect than that of the historian placed in the center. Due to the ideology of the universalism of modern art, the historian of the center, often quite unconsciously, tends to ignore the significance of place, thus becoming an instrument of colonization. In

his or her opinion, if art is universal, the place from which it speaks does not matter. The (close) Other, much more sensitive to context and quick to realize the importance of “relational geography”,¹⁵ can make us aware that we do not write our statements in the middle of nowhere, but in specific locations. After all, the center is also just a place with specific local legal, ethnic, and cultural parameters. The subject occupying the center tends to forget that it is situated there, in a place precisely located on the map of the world. The Other, or for our purposes the so-called close Other, who cannot forget His own location, can provide the historian of the center with self-consciousness. A historian of modern Czech or Romanian art knows very well where he or she is, while a historian of modern art in France or the United States often ignores this and thus tends to universalize the merely local.

Here we reach the key problem of horizontal art history, which is the problem of localization. If we take a look at books on the history of modern art, it is evident that we are faced either with what is presented as simply the “history of modern art” with no local specification, or with all kinds of adjectives specifying the regional (for example, the art of Eastern Europe, or of the Balkans) or – more often – the ethnic locality (for instance, the history of Polish, Slovak or Bulgarian art). The problem of national or ethnic art historical narratives seems very characteristic of the arts outside the center. On the one hand, we have the national art histories of particular countries, on the other the international art history. In fact, the latter’s type of art historical narrative reveals the dynamics of modern art history – again, on the one hand, we have artists with an international status, although all of them actually come from specific countries and their art bears the mark of their national cultures – Pablo Picasso who came from Spain, but is recognized as an international, or universal artist – while on the other hand, there are artists who remain specifically national, even though some of them were once also renowned abroad (such as the ‘Polish’ constructivist Władysław Strzemiński). This reveals tensions of a geographical kind: on the one hand, there are Paris and later New York as international centers of culture, on the other, regional capitals placed in national contexts, such as Belgrade, Copenhagen, Oslo, Prague, Vilnius. Obviously, in the hierarchy of art historical narratives, the former are highly appreciated, while the latter are often underrated or ignored.

In order to address this issue in more detail, I want to ask another question: Apart from the ideological conditions, what were the material

¹⁵ Irit Rogoff, “Engendering Terror”, in: Ursula Biemann (ed.), *Geography and the Politics of Mobility*, Wien-Köln 2003, 33 onward, here 53.

conditions which supported the national constructions of the history of modern art? I think that what mattered most was the lack of direct communication among cultures. If there was any intercommunication at all among marginal cultures, it was via the center, as can be observed on every level. The cultures of particular regions (the Balkans, Eastern Europe, Scandinavia) looked up to the West, and not at one another. They drew information about each other predominantly from the West, and not from other margins. The same is true for individual national art historical narratives in specific regions, even regions as small as Central Europe. Poles generally have almost no idea about the history of Romanian art – they ignore it out of a superiority complex on behalf of their own culture, which they prefer to compare directly to the West. Similarly, Czechs on average know little, if nothing, about the history of Ukrainian art. The Other, or – again – the “close Other” looks up to the Master, and not at “An-Other”, accepting – often quite unconsciously – the hierarchy of the center to which it has fallen victim. If there is any transfer of values, experience or knowledge, it passes only through the Master (that is, the Western centers) who in this way legitimizes one specific Other in the eyes of “An-Other”.

Of course, the relations between the center and the localities defined in national terms have been changing. Modern culture produced the tension between the national and the international, while contemporary culture, which can be characterized as postmodern, globalized, and multiple, tends to prefer a different vocabulary, promoting local identity. For the sake of universalist utopias of unity, modernism tended to evade any individual identities: ethnic, local, sexual, racial, and others. The very adjective “international” implied a state of being “inter-”, “beyond” or “above” all individual and national features (as, for instance, in the “international” style or art scene). That rhetoric definitely served to conceal the imperialism of the West, as easily perceived on the most basic level of the language used by the “international” society: first French, then English. The present situation, however, calls for new strategies, and the collapse of the universalist utopia indicated by global conflicts makes everyone accept some identity mark at least as a starting point. Good examples of this new attitude have been provided by interpretations of the art of Marina Abramović or Ilya Kabakov, for whom national origins are important. What is more, this tendency promotes a reconstruction of the national origins of many avant-garde ideas, blurred by the paradigm of international modernism, as exemplified by the analyses of the work of Marcel Duchamp in the context of French art, or of Kazimir Malevich in the context of the Russian tradition. Surely, all this is not so brand new, as I already indicated above. Yet when we turn to studies of those two artists

from the 1930s, 1940s or 1950s, they show few traces of the national contextualization of these artists' achievement, which appeared much later.

In this context, a relevant concept is *transnationality*, which, as is well known, is not to be confused with internationality. The concept of transnationality is very useful in order to develop a horizontal art history of the European avant-garde. Of course, an open model of writing global art history must include other aspects of identity as well, rooted in perspectives different from that of critical geography: specific genders, ethnic groups, subcultures, etc. Such revisions of art history, for instance from a feminist point of view, have been proposed for many years now, but very often they do not break away from the dominant geographico-hierarchical paradigm of modern art history. Transnational art history, negotiating values and concepts along other lines than the opposition of the national versus the international, is now being written as well, as evidenced by the regional art historical narratives mentioned earlier. This maturing transnational discourse comes with the prospect of great significance to our histories of the European avant-garde: a transnational art history enabling its authors to negotiate the local narratives on the transregional, that is, European level.

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