Marxism(s) in Art Historiography (Berlin, 31 Jan - 2 Feb 20)

Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Jan 31–Feb 2, 2020
Deadline: Jul 15, 2019

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Marxism(s) in Art Historiography

Conference organized by the chair of Art History of Eastern Europe (Vert.-Prof. Dr. Katja Bernhardt, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) in cooperation with the Institute of Art History and Visual Culture (Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn) and the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO, University of Leipzig)

The historical and dialectical materialism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels provided a complex means of approaching the analysis of social processes that encouraged one to understand and analyse art as a moment integral to these processes. This approach presented an alternative worth taking seriously to art-historical models that had previously dominated discussion; models based on the idea of art as something that developed intrinsically. Nevertheless, it has always been a challenge to adapt Marxist theory for use in art-historical analysis and to link that theory to existing approaches to the subject. For art history, grappling with Marxism meant more than just a need for constant methodological reflection and updating. It was also necessary, and remains necessary, to define the Marxist conception of art itself within the various historical contexts in which it arose. Since Marxist theory aims at achieving social change, applying Marxism has demanded not only that art be set in relation to the social conditions that apply to it, but also to making a critical revision of the history of art and to revealing its social role in the relevant context in each case.

The conference sets out from these starting points. It aims to reflect on the history of Marxist approaches to Art History, hoping to reveal new insights for the wider discipline. It forms the third part in a series of conferences whose task was set as to investigate the history of art history in Eastern European countries formerly under socialist rule. In the wake of the first two conferences, “Art History and Socialism(s) after World War II” (2016, Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn) and “Socialist Internationalism and the Global Contemporary. Transnational Art Historiographies from Eastern and East-Central Europe” (2017, GWZO Leipzig), this third conference will make a programmatic break from the geopolitical framework set out up until now. It will thus bring together considerations on Marxist art history that have up until now generally been treated separately in accordance with the political systems within which they arose. We believe that the potentials of and the variations between the various different Marxist approaches to art history – both in relation to the concepts that they contribute to art history methodology and in terms of their socio-political functions – can be elaborated using a comparative approach and can thus be subjected to

a differentiated critique. The historical beginning of the period for our observations is set roughly around 1945. We would like observations to extend into the period after 1989 and all the way up until the present day, so that we can include in our reflection the response made to what was a fundamentally transformed political situation.

We would like to examine how Marxism was adapted for the purposes of art-historical analysis in each specific historical moment under whatever political system under which it found itself.

- What impulses and demands both from within and outside the subject of art history were available to tackle Marxist theories and/or to subject existing Marxist approaches to art history to criticism? What role did the relevant institutional, local, national and other contexts play in these processes?

- What key points of theory were addressed, what pre-existing concepts were seized upon and what new ones were coined, and what aspects of theory became subject to criticism? How did the actors interlock their approaches with established strategies of art-historical interpretation and/or with discourses and discussions outside the field of art history (for example, on questions of nation, socialism, post-colonialism, feminist theory, etc.)?

- To what extent did appeals to Marxist theories succeed in opening out potential insights into art history and in making a substantial contribution to the fruitful revision, critique and further development of models of art-historical analysis? Have any innovative new models emerged? What critiques were raised against art histories based on Marxism? In what contexts did the concept of 'Marxist art history' remain no more than a hollow formulation that responded to political requirements, inside which other conceptions could be concealed?

- To what extent did the art-historical reflections of Marxist theory succeed in delivering an approach to the critique of the theory itself and/or to the historicization of Marx's understanding of art and/or of conceptions that followed on from Marx?

- How was the concept of 'art' negotiated in this context? Is it possible to identify approaches to a theory of art through these processes? To what extent and on the basis of what theoretical premises were concepts of a comprehensive art theory, Kunstwissenschaft, discussed in connection with Marxism?

- Who were the actors in these processes (from within the discipline and from people involved in culture policy, publishing, etc.)? What forms of institutionalization did such actors use to establish a Marxist history of art? What types of subject-related, social, political criticism were formulated or demanded by that institutionalization?

- To what extent was political or ideological commitment derived from or required of art history on the basis of a Marxist concept of art? How was it, and how was it expected to be, practised?

These questions should be understood as suggestions: specific, object-related elaborations of the issues would be very much welcome. Case studies or cross-sectional presentations would also be positively received, as would reflections on theoretical models and methodological discussions.

The conference will take place in Berlin from 31 January to 2 February 2020 at the Department for Art and Visual History of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

Please send your exposé, with a length of approx. 2000 characters, by 15 July 2019 to: katja.bernhardt@culture.hu-berlin.de

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