Archeologies of the Communist Avant-Gardes (Weimar, 25-26 Jun 26)

Weimar, Jun 25–26, 2026
Deadline: Dec 15, 2025

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Archeologies of the Communist Avant-Gardes: Ephemerality and Leftist Visual Production in Central and Eastern Europe between the World Wars.

This workshop investigates the archives of politically and socially engaged leftist art produced between the World Wars in Central and Eastern Europe, a region broadly understood here as spanning from Weimar Germany to the Soviet Union. Much of this leftist visual production has been long "destroyed-disappeared-lost-never were," to use the provocative theoretical and methodological framework developed by Beate Fricke and Aden Kumler to study premodern visual and material cultures (Fricke and Kumler, 2022). In stark contrast to the epistemological absence of premodern art, the 1920s and '30s are arguably among the most richly documented and well-studied decades of modernisms and the avant-gardes in Central and Eastern Europe. And yet, this workshop contends, much of the leftist political art and visual culture produced in the region in the early 20th century falls outside the scope of art histories, art exhibitions, and museum collections. This archival and therefore epistemological obscurity results from a complex web of historical, historiographical, and methodological conditions. First, communist and other leftist artists in Central and Eastern Europe were often working under conditions of invisibility, either involuntarily due to state censorship and authoritarian politics, or as a conscious strategy to avoid repressions. Second, Central and Eastern European histories of artistic modernisms continue to be shaped by Cold War political fantasies. Continuously obsessed with notions of originality, novelty, and abstract experimentations, avant-garde studies are largely unequipped to analyze aesthetic objects that privileged collective aesthetic forms and easily legible and didactic solidarities in the name of fostering mass politics. Finally, one must grapple with the very absence of objects that could tell us about the aesthetic and political strategies of leftist collective desires from the past. While recent studies and exhibitions have brought innovative research methods to studying guerilla art and the art of protest (e.g., Flood and Grindon, Disobedient Objects, 2014; Gleisser, Risk Work, 2023), these most often focus on the period past the 1960s, due to the fact that earlier examples of so-called "disobedient objects" do not exist any longer. The majority of communist visual and artistic practices in Central and Eastern Europe was quintessentially ephemeral or has become so. Therefore studying communist and antifascist propaganda, anonymous leftist printmaking, street and festive decoration and agit-prop objects, monuments, Proletkul't, worker's photography and worker-correspondence movements, textile and applied arts, and didactic and scientific filmmaking among other aesthetic forms, calls for new and innovative research methods across disciplines.

As an experiment with what we call the “archeologies of the communist avant-gardes,” this workshop proposes to explore the following topics:
- Popular desires: What would bring people to the streets and what aesthetic forms, gestures, and ideas did people bring to mass or community politics in the 1920s and ‘30s in Central and Eastern Europe?
- Movements and networks: What kind of artistic and political experiments constituted the art of leftist political commitments a century ago, and what were the global networks of solidarities, desires, and hate that mobilized artists and people in the region, in alliance with social movements (such as the labor movement, radical feminism, anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, anti- racist, and antifascist politics)?
- Media of politicization: What aesthetic forms and media were put in the service of communist politics and how? We are as much interested in how traditional genres such as easel painting and sculpture were revamped for leftist mass politics, as in new media in all its hybrid forms, including photography, film, and photomontage, as well as the fields of graphic design, poster art, public art, and the applied arts, theater, and music.
- Historiographical frameworks: What historical and critical concepts can help us better understand the conjuncture of cultural and artistic communisms in the decades between the World Wars and move beyond the ideological oppositions of ‘realism’ vs. ‘modernism’, or ‘totalitarian’ vs. ‘autonomous’ art. We invite participants to reflect on recent models such as “embedded modernism” (Romberg, 2018), “proletarian modernism” (Hake, 2017), and the “political confrontation of the arts” (Werckmeister, 2020), and to propose novel ways of conceptualizing communist visual production in line with the specifically local (political, social, linguistic and cultural) conditions of the region.
- Archeology of the ephemeral object: How do we study objects that have disappeared, which were even designed to disappear, and of which only archival traces exist, if anything? We invite participants to provide methodological reflections on the material conditions of these archives, discussing both pragmatic considerations and theoretical frameworks. Artistic interventions and experimental formats are equally warmly welcome at the workshop. We are interested in the state of archives not so much as historicists, but for how they concern and relate to politics in our present time. As Walter Benjamin notes, “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (Benjamin, “On the Concept of History”). How do we account for the political conditions of such disappearance? And what does it mean to study the ephemeral objects of the communist avant-gardes today?

Please send the title and short abstract of your presentation or experimental intervention (max. 250 words) and a short bio in one PDF-document to tobias.ertl@unifr.ch and adrienn.kacsor@uni-weimar.de by December 15, 2025.

Organizers: Tobias Ertl (University of Fribourg) and Adrienn Kácsor (Bauhaus University, Weimar).

The workshop, hosted by the Bauhaus University in Weimar, is designed to form the basis of a planned publication, giving presenters a chance to brainstorm their work in a critical collective.

Reference:

CFP: Archeologies of the Communist Avant-Gardes (Weimar, 25-26 Jun 26). In: ArtHist.net, Nov 3, 2025 (accessed Oct 6, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/51051>.