VII International Forum for Doctoral Candidates in East European Art History

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[Conference report on behalf of the organisers]

In her introduction to the edited volume 'Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present', Beáta Hock reflects on "[…] a recurrent worry whenever countries are lumped together under the regional signifier of "east-central" or "eastern" Europe that a coherent region is being posited by this designation."[1] Such concern about the potentially homogeneous narrative and niche-like quality of discourse emerging from a convention dedicated specifically to east-central Europe was dispelled by the breadth and depth of papers presented at the recent VII International Forum for Doctoral Candidates in East European Art History, organised by the department of Art and Visual History at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. After an unplanned hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Dr Katalin Cseh-Varga, the chair of the department for East European Art History, and her team succeeded in moving the conference to an online format, allowing 41 participants from 31 institutions across 16 countries to present their current research while engaging in a fruitful discussion of common themes and issues.

The new online format called for a re-thinking of the conference structure, letting the organisers to successfully experiment with the forum's format. Consequently, the 2021 programme was split into two sections: the first half-day introduced 'morning coffee chats' as discursive sessions for participants and organisers while the second full day was structured more traditionally with four panels of three papers, each chaired by an accomplished scholar within the field. Additionally, the organisers opted for using the communication platform Slack where participants could post questions, exchange information and comment on each other's presentations. This added to the flow of ideas and facilitated networking in the absence of real-life attendance. Even if smaller in scope than the previous live iterations, the VII Forum nonetheless provided a platform for an engaged and in-depth conversation among the younger generation of researchers working across a multitude of subjects, countries and periods within Eastern European art history.

The morning coffee chats centred around three theoretical texts selected by the conference organisers for participants to read ahead of the event – Robin Kelsey's 'Introduction: Riddles and Premises' from his book 'Archive Style: Photographs and Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850-1890', the aforementioned 'Introduction – Globilizing East European Art Histories: The Legacy of Piotr Piotrowski and a Conference' by Beáta Hock, and Harvey J. Graff's 'The "Problem" of Interdisciplinarity in Theory, Practice, and History'. During the first chat, dedicated to archives and

chaired by Dr Cseh-Varga, attendees spoke about the aesthetic vs. discursive relation to an archive, the often-fragmentary nature of the preserved material with the ensuing need to absorb this into the scholarly narrative and methodological approach, and the challenges of archival work during the pandemic. The morning progressed with the second chat 'Mapping and Transnational Networks' supervised by the forum's participant Zsuzsa László (Budapest). A multitude of issues was addressed during this session, starting with those springing directly from Hock's text – questioning of the regional identity, approaching Eastern Europe as a modernist construct, and reconciling internationalism and cosmopolitanism with national(ist) preoccupations. Such ruminations led to a broader pool of concerns – the need to 'humanise' the researched subjects, to see them as individuals and expressions of their time and place rather than projections of later ideologies, as well as the question of self-reflection and rigorous engagement with one's own academic positioning. In the final chat of the morning, chaired by another participant, Alexandra Timonina (Venice), the group deliberated the question of interdisciplinarity and its application within art historical research. The selection proved relevant to all participants and the workshop nature of these chats allowed for a more informal introduction of the research projects while debating issues relatable to all.

The second day started with a panel dedicated to the early modern period chaired by Dr Ágnes Kriza (London). The presented papers by Ester Griffin (Warsaw), Felix Schmieder (Warsaw) and Rebecca Partikel (Marburg) covered various aspects of art production, patronage and collecting in the Kingdom of Poland. Respectively, they explored the politics of identity-building behind the royal collections of Maria Kazimiera (1641-1716), the gender-defined spaces in royal residences of the Jagiellonian queen-consorts, and the anatomical publications of Johannes Hevelius (1611-1687). The second panel, chaired by Dr Matthew Rampley (Brno), looked at the late modern and avant-garde art practices across countries. Anikó Bojtos (Budapest) introduced her research on the system of art education in Hungary in the late nineteenth century; Olena Skip's (München) paper provided a glimpse into the little-studied subject of the Ukrainian avant-garde art, while Elisaveta Dvorakk (Berlin) explored Annemarie Schwarzenbach's (1908-1942) photojournalistic works produced during her trips to the Soviet Union in 1937-38.

The day progressed with the third panel dedicated to the post-WWII art scene chaired by Dr Beáta Hock (Leipzig). Combining a sociological and art historical approaches, Zofia Rohozińska (Warsaw) scrutinised mechanisms of knowledge production in Poland using a case study of the discourse on socialist realism in leading art publications between 1951 and 2020. Tereza Johanidesová's (Prague) paper outlined her research into the phenomenon of the so-called Czech Marxist iconology and its positioning vis-à-vis the better-known Western variant. The panel concluded with Sonja Jankov's (Belgrade) analysis of the influence of Yugoslav modernist architecture on the practice of several contemporary artists from the region. The final panel of the forum, overseen by Dr Allison Leigh (Lafayette), addressed art and architecture in the Russian Empire, starting with Maria Chukcheeva's (St. Petersburg) reconstruction of the circulation of knowledge within the Russian artistic milieu of the nineteenth century. Irina Mania (Tbilisi) then walked the audience through the peculiar architectural features of the Tbilisi caravanserais and Natalia Tuschinski (Tübingen) presented her study of the so-called Greek Project of Catherine the Great (1729-1796) and the architectural aesthetics employed within its framework.

One of the key questions that kept surfacing in the course of both days was that of methodolo-

gies and the caution needed in choosing certain theories and critical stances for research projects. Subsequently, the issue of knowledge projection arose highlighting the need for the material to determine the line of art historical enquiry rather than forcing theories onto it. In their responses and questions to the panellists, Beáta Hock and Matthew Rampley advised participants to exercise methodological consciousness. Both scholars urged the younger generation of art historians to actively interrogate the employed definitions and theories, be it the popular Actor-Network Theory, the concept of socialist realism, or the application of feminist or gender studies. At the same time, the summaries of the delivered papers by Ágnes Kriza and Allison Leigh, which formed the basis of their response to them, provided participants with a master-class in receptiveness and critical engagement with the presented material.

The VII International Forum for Doctoral Candidates in East European Art History successfully illustrated that, despite the diversity of studied subjects across neighbouring cultures in the region, the current research affiliated with the field strives to embrace the fluidity and complexity of identities and a comparative approach when investigating the networks of production and movement of items, individuals and ideas both regionally and beyond. As the result, the art history of Eastern Europe can be truly contemplated from a transnational perspective as opposed to it operating within a framework of the increasingly obsolete national-local and Western narratives.

Notes

[1] Beáta Hock, 'Introduction – Globilizing East European Art Histories: The Legacy of Piotr Piotrowski and a Conference', in 'Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present', ed. Beáta Hock and Anu Allas (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 7.

[2] For the outline of all research papers and projects see http://www.kunstgeschichte.hu-berlin.de/institut/lehrstuehle/lehrstuhl-fuer-kunstgeschichte-osteuropas/internationales-doktorandenforum/2021-internationales-doktorandenforum/39804-2/

[3] Robin Kelsey, 'Archive Style: Photographs and Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850-1890' (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 1-18. Hock, 'Introduction – Globilizing East European Art Histories', pp. 1-22. Harvey J. Graff, 'The "Problem" of Interdisciplinarity in Theory, Practice, and History', Social Science History, vol. 40, issue 4 (2016), pp. 775-803.

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