

Mythmaking Eastern Europe: Art in Response

Institute of Art History at the University of Zurich, Oct 18, 2012

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Mythmaking Eastern Europe: Art in Response, International Symposium

Institute of Art History at the University of Zurich in cooperation with the Swiss Institute for Art Research SIK-ISEA, Zurich, 18.10.2012

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The last large Eastern European art exhibition took place at the Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou in Paris in 2010. The curators of this ambitious show, Christine Macel and Joanna Mytkowska, declared that "Eastern Europe does not exist" [1]. Nevertheless they recovered the myth of the deceased region by displaying a problematic understanding of contemporary art from Eastern Europe based on East-West stereotypes as well as on the artist vs. state apparatus antagonism shown through the exhibition narrative. [2] The dissolution of any non-Western geo-political region appears to be proclaimed by the Western art establishment at the moment its exotic or commercial potential has been emptied out. At the same time, the regional art historical research, in this case the scholarship of the art in former Eastern Europe, bears the difficulty of constructing the collective, generalized characteristics of art rather than scrutinizing the many aspects of its multifaceted complexity.

It is out of the necessity to react to the arguable status of present research of art from Eastern Europe that the conference Mythmaking Eastern Europe: Art in Response was organized with the aim to critically reassess the problematic methodological aspects in this academic field. As the conference organizer Mateusz Kapustka (University of Zurich) pointed out in his introductory lecture, one of the greatest difficulties in the research of art in Eastern Europe lies in the creation of collective identities of East European artists whose main characteristics appear to be the indifference towards the political regime and experimental art practice in the range of new media. This uniformed perception induces the mythical status of an East European artist struggling for freedom through escapism from the everyday political oppression that is further on being instrumentalized as a starting point for scholarly elaborations. Therefore, the conference intended to initiate a debate that critically analyzes the existing myths related to art of Eastern Europe by re-questioning the tense correlation between art and official politics in the countries of this region, as well as through reevaluation of the commonly overlooked interweaving between official and alternative (neo-avantgarde) artistic practices developed there. Furthermore, it tends to offer different perspectives on art research by illuminating the far-reaching consequences the stereotypical image of Eastern Europe has on the present discourse of art history. The question how art history as an academic discipline could gain a new identity that surpasses the politicized geographical concerns in this particular context, as remarked by Kapustka, represents a recurrent issue of all the topics presented during the conference.

The first part of the symposium, presided by Beat Wyss (Hochschule für Gestaltung, Karlsruhe), was opened with a lecture by Piotr Juszkiewicz (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań). In his insightful presentation Juszkiewicz offered a careful deconstruction of the myth evolved around the concept of totalitarianism in connection to its modernist opponent. On a couple of examples from visual arts, urbanism and film mainly made in Poland during the Cold War, he emphasized that communism was, contrary to how it is frequently considered, a process of modernization in terms of the industrial, architectural, and even artistic development it undertook. The (communist) totalitarianism, as argued by Juszkiewicz, was not in binary opposition to modernism, but in fact it shared the historical properties of modernism as its counterpart in the process of modernization which, translated to the field of artistic production in the Eastern Block, brings a rather altered view on the imposed antagonism between social realism and modernist art practice. His theses rely on the methodological scheme of “horizontal art history” offered by Piotr Piotrowski, which will stand as one of the key approaches in the proposal of new possibilities in art historical research during the rest of the conference. [3]

Liviana Dan (Brukenthal National Museum, Sibiu) introduced a paper on the reception of ideas of avant-garde art in contemporary art practices in Romania. By illuminating the concepts of art that stand behind the works of the two most prominent Romanian artists Constantin Brancusi and Tristan Tzara, she indicated the heroic status of these two artists in their home country as well as the misinterpretations these myths initiated within the work of contemporary artists. In a broader context the troublesome relationship between the past and the present was analyzed through the lenses of art historical research: the inadequate scholarly contextualization of avant-garde art from Eastern Europe, said Dan, opens a space for peculiar ideological perspectives that influences the development of contemporary art and scholarship, which is in fact detached from the original ideas of avant-garde it refers to. Her proposition for the solution of this methodological impediment is the creation of “new art” that is able to start a balanced dialogue with its social surroundings.

The second part of the conference was opened by Zdenka Badovinac (Museum of Modern Art and Museum of Contemporary Art, Ljubljana) who discussed the phenomenon of institutional critique in the context of art from Eastern Europe. Concentrating on her own curatorial practice, Badovinac presented the particular cooperation between Slovene art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) and Moderna galerija (Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana). The practice of NSK art collective, which was established around authentic and often controversial forms of institutional critique in former Yugoslavia during the 1980s, was immediately recognized and supported by the institutional politics of the Modern Art Museum in Ljubljana. Promoting the institutional critique as an integral part of the institutionalized exhibition strategies in former Yugoslavia indicates that the universally imposed Western art terminology needs to be reconsidered and readjusted when investigating associated phenomena from non-Western regions.

The last session of the symposium, chaired by Annika Hossain (SIK-ISEA Zurich) and Jörg Scheller (Zürcher Hochschule der Künste), introduced young scholars who are undertaking the research within the complex subject of East European art. Daria Ghiu (Bucharest) explored the legacy of Constantin Brancusi in Romania through analysis of an unrealized proposal for the Romanian Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale. As a response to the status of a national hero Brancusi has in his homeland, the young artist Alexandra Croitoru with the art historian Stefan Tiron proposed a potentially subversive exhibition concept that imagined the national Pavilion as a place of active remembrance of Brancusi and his artistic legacy in the setting highly resembling

the interior of a catholic church. A widely established artist myth in this situation functioned as a starting point for artistic deconstruction of the public imagination, which in broader context presents a requisite of the younger generation of artists to release a burden of social and artistic stereotypes that constitute the troublesome relationship between the present and the past in Romania. The relationship with the national heritage was the topic of Kinga Bódi's (Budapest) presentation as well. Through an examination of Andreas Fogarasi's art project *Kultur und Freizeit* (Culture and Leisure), which won a Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 2007, she presented the shift in the collective perception of the function of cultural centers in Hungary. Used as a platform for active social life and cultural propaganda at the time of socialism, these spaces were mostly abandoned after the political change in 1989 and later transformed into alternative exhibition venues, cinemas, or hobby clubs.

The role of the Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade (SKC) established by the state after the student protest in 1968 in the wider context of the specific political position of socialist Yugoslavia was in the focus of Seraina Renz's (Zurich / Belgrade) lecture. Using the example of performance practice by artist Raša Todosijević in SKC, who intentionally refers to the figures of Western art such as Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys, Renz implied the close relations between the alternative (neo-avantgarde) art practices and official politics in the 1970s that still remain a controversial topic in the art historical research of the Belgrade art scene. The final lecture by Mirela Ljevakovic (KHI Florence / LMU University of Munich) presented an overview of the current state of art institutions in Sarajevo. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the wars that followed its crises, the political transition and economic crises in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina caused the closure of major museums and gallery spaces in the field of contemporary art in the country's capital. The reactions by the artists and the indifference of the state towards this serious problem stood in the focus of Ljevakovic's paper.

The closing words were given by Mateusz Kapustka who ascertained the great potential of and the requirement for new art historical research of the large East European art corpus. Mainly following Piotrowski's methodological scheme of concentrating on the exploration of specific phenomena of art from the "margins", the conference participants offered an analysis of very different occurrences in art that developed inside the great geographical area of Eastern Europe in the context of the specific national or local settings. The results of the conference not only demonstrated the complex heterogeneity of art production within the Eastern Europe of the past, but also indicated the problematic value of interpreting art history of this region through Western terminology and theory. Once these difficulties, as well as the myths, have been critically investigated, a foundation that would support and offer new bilateral or multilateral scholarly elaborations appears as a possible perspective. It is precisely the impetus for initiating the improved basis for artistic research of art from Eastern Europe through international scholarly dialogue within the contemporary post-hegemonial and global perspective, which was encouraged during the conference, that presents as one of its most important contributions to the current research with the goal of connecting different art histories.

Endnotes:

[1] Macel, Christine and Mytkowska, Joanna, "Promises of the Past", in: Macel, Christine and Petrešin-Bachelez, Nataša (eds.), *Promises of the Past. A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*, exhib. cat., Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou, Paris, 2010, p.18.

[2] A thorough analysis of the exhibition context was given in an exhibition review by Mateusz Kapustka.

See: Kapustka, Mateusz, „Jet lag, oder vom Unbehagen einer Mythos. Zur Ausstellung Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe, kuratiert von Christine Macel und Joanna Mytkowska, Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou, Paris, 14.04.-19.07.2010“, in: *kunsttexte.de/ostblick*, 2011.1,

<http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/kunsttexte/2011-1/kapustka-mateusz-11/PDF/kapustka.pdf>, [10.11.2012].

[3] For Piotrowski's notion of horizontal art history, see: Piotrowski, Piotr, "On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History", in: *Umeni/Art*, No. 5, 2008, p. 378-383.; Piotrowski, Piotr, *In the shadow of Yalta: art and avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*, London: Reaktion Books, 2009.

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