

## Rewriting Art History in Eastern Europe

***Art History on the Disciplinary Map in East-Central Europe.* Moravian Gallery, Brno. Organized in cooperation with Masaryk University Brno and Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA. 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> November 2010**

Review by Daria Ghiu

How to write an art history in Eastern Europe? In the last decade, this question has been progressively raised to prominence within a body of consecrated debates which have taken place in various sectors of the cultural field, and which have directly addressed the centre / periphery dialectics. The endeavour of offering an answer to this question received a new impetus once eastern art historians were called to respond to its challenges in a collective attempt to confirm the thesis of the death of (western) art history's grand narratives. Subsequently, the task of symposia and conferences, such as that which constitutes the object of the present review, is to jointly develop tactics, strategies and even methodologies for self-empowerment in a process of articulating "dissident", "minor", and marginal manners of writing the art history of the marginal East.

Organized by the Clark Art Institute (Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA), as part of its East-Central Europe initiative, *Unfolding Narratives: Art Histories in East-Central Europe After 1989*, the travelling seminar "Art History on the Disciplinary Map in East-Central Europe" took place on the 18th and 19th of November 2010 in Brno. Last spring, the seminar series started in Tallinn with a joint partnership with the Estonian Academy of Arts. It will be terminated in May 2011 in Bucharest with a symposium organized in collaboration with the New Europe College. This time, the partners of the Brno conference were the Masaryk University and the Moravian Gallery, with the latter hosting two days of intensive lectures. Throwing a glimpse at the structure of the seminar, it becomes evident that the organizers placed their stakes on a platform for knowledge exchange and communication, which explains why extended time (up to one hour) was granted to the discussion of the papers selected after an

open call. The seminar comprised four panels, *Localized vs. Globalized Narratives of Art, Exhibitions as Art History, Disciplinary and Institutional Frameworks* and *Blind Spots of Art History in Central/Eastern Europe*. The aim of this review is to offer a subjective overview of some of the themes and positions taken by the scholars within this meeting.

After 1990, East-European provenance constituted both a label used by curators in their strife to launch new names and aesthetic concepts on the scene, and the result of a process of self-appropriation and self-colonization of those artists who worked and lived in former socialist countries, but who desired to attain visibility in the Western art spaces and their financial circuits. This seminar explored the facets of writing art history in the East inclusively as a process of self-questioning, an inquiry into the possibilities and conditions of revising and rewriting the canons, with a view to the recent development of East European art and its venues of display. What are the tasks of art historians coming from the East? This was the main question that the invited scholars, among them Edit Andras, Eva Forgacs, Ladislav Kesner, Keith Moxey, Anca Oroveanu, Piotr Piotrowski and Beat Wyss tried to answer. The discussions proceeded from a perceived overall hegemonic presence of the Western manner of writing East's art history. This phenomenon has engendered a process that establishes and reproduces canons, leaving blind spots and disciplining the ways we perceive art. Disclosing and revising the canons seem to be, therefore, natural counter-movements.

Piotr Piotrowski is one of the most active art historians who, over the past decade, wrote extensively about the nature of the relation between centre and periphery. Whereas the centre provides artistic para-

digms, canons, hierarchies of values and stylistic norms, the role of the periphery, argues the Polish art historian, is to adopt them in the process of their appropriation. Piotrowski has insistently asked for methodological revisions of the ways we see, think and write about East European art. His suggestion is to adopt a “horizontal art history”, as opposed to the Western “vertical” paradigm. What the Polish art historian in consequence proposes, is to allow ourselves the chance of changing perspectives: to look from the periphery towards the centre and to see how this new gaze modifies the perception, the canon, styles and homogeneity. In this context, it could be said that the four panels investigated the circumstances of this change in the gaze. To begin with, ANNA BRZYSKI (University of Kentucky), criticized in her lecture in the *Localized vs. Globalized Narratives of Art* the discipline of art history that is constructed as a “discourse on the cultural self”; there is a hidden danger here that pertains to the creating of a global and neutral discourse about the artistic cultures of the world. In other words, the global discourse will only simulate the process of constituting productive meanings, whereas its comfortable areas of application will always be unable to acknowledge “the areas outside of the mainstream of art history”. Thus, an art history written as such remains merely an effective “colonial strategy”. In this context, the question that Maja and Reuben Fowkes ask in the frame of the same panel, whether we could ever integrate art made in socialism in the structures of a global art history – turns out to be particularly challenging and important.

Concepts such as *nation, identity, gender* and *minority* have exploded in the multiplicity of critical discourses of the last twenty years. In their intervention which discussed trends of the post-1989 art scene, MAJA and REUBEN FOWKES (London) suggested to define the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in terms of an ongoing search for identity, as a time, when artists would intensively exercise the construction of new types of subjectivity. Key-concepts such as those mentioned above articulated this search for the self, within which the wish to rediscover suppressed cultures, as well as the “desire to reconnect with the cultural history of neighbouring countries”, came to the foreground. The knowledge, that this process drew atten-

tion to, had been obstructed by the borders erected during the era of state socialism. The same authors describe the second decade of post-communism as a period of “post-transition”, since – they argue – many of the political goals of the transition have been achieved; at the same time, cynicism progressively replaced the belief in economic and social utopias of a globalized Eastern Europe. In the context of the conference, however, this choice of terms seems somewhat infelicitous, since the supposed “transition” of the East presupposed the adoption of Western standards, structures and models, which is exactly what this seminar criticizes. From a critical point of view, then, the process that the authors are trying to describe, of the passage from a “crude national identity” towards a more post-national sensitivity which resulted in “more complex, fluid and multi-layered forms of belonging” could be seen rather as a “deterritorializing moment” in which Eastern artists start to break the confines in which the Western thinking is placing them, and to position themselves critically. The same aspect was also examined within the section *Exhibitions as Art History* by CHRISTOPHER NAE (Lași), who offered an analysis of retrospective exhibitions (*The Body and the East, Blood and Honey, The Future lies in the Balkans, After the Wall, Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe* and *Gender Check, Transitland or Promises of the Past*) that took place both in the West and the East after 1989. Nae suggested that these artistic events have had the potential of creating temporary identities and their own artistic canons. Whereas in the 90s artists tried to “fill in the gap”, in the new millennium the “East-European” label and the overall increasing demands of the global market for etiquettes starts to bother these artists. Nae describes the result of this evolution as the “cross-over effect of overlapping identities”.

Another concern of the seminar was to assess the manners in which dominance is expressed in language, terminology and access to bibliographies. In their panel intervention, Maja and Reuben Fowkes also raised the question of literary sources, of what counts as primary and secondary literature, as the manners of researching a topic in the East might be very different compared to the modalities used in the West. Being in the search for a new art history paradigm which Beat

Wyss described in the discussions opened to the public as “subjectifying yourself and your own country”, ÉVA FORGÁCS (Passadena) argued in her lecture that one of the most significant “blind spots” of the East is “the lack of a valid terminology”. Art in the East has been often described using the concepts of the Western canons which eventually leads to a subordinate condition. This terminological absence engenders the impossibility of validating the existence of a specific art in Eastern and Central Europe. The sensible issues of “official art” under socialism and of socialist realism become particularly significant within this context. Seen as a gap in the Eastern European art history, socialist realism still provokes a certain fear of approaching it comprehensively. Interestingly resonating with the questions raised by Maja and Reuben Fowkes, this was one of the assumptions of JULIANA MAXIM’S, put forward in a provocative lecture, which stresses the reticence characterizing research dealing with socialist realism. Furthermore, by scrutinizing “the mechanisms through which art history jettisons some topics from its *repertoire*”, Maxim places again the issue of terminology in the horizon of the question of power struggle which is expressed in the manners of writing art history. In the context of these discussions, Beat Wyss reintroduced an issue we often forget – that of the subjectivity conducting the research, which is engaged in a continuous dialectical exchange with its object of study, altering it at the same pace that it gets altered. “You cannot reinvent art history, but make it your own”, said Wyss, glossing the idea that art history becomes a virtual mirror for the researcher. If the art historian makes art history his own, then a methodology of altering canons has an identifiable starting point which is the researcher’s own self.

At the same time, the seminar did not avoid discussing the fact that art history cannot be written in the absence of the material conditions which would sustain research projects, the publishing of books, the organization of international conferences, etc. Given that these resources are available for the West and lack in the East, a strategy like that suggested by Anca Oroveanu, of prioritizing tasks, of identifying urgencies that East European art historians face, could stand better chances. But when adopting such a pragmatic approach to issues, it soon becomes evid-

ent that we are still in a stage, in which many more questions are being raised than answers are being provided. This is the reason for me to end this text by paralleling the discussions in this seminar with those raised on the occasion of one of the most important East art retrospectives of the last years, *Les Promesses du Passé. Une histoire discontinuée de l’art dans l’Europe de l’Est* (Promises of the Past. A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe). KELLY PRESUTTI’S (Los Angeles) paper actually focused on this exhibition and suggested that its conceptual battery which revolves around Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “*discontinuum*” and of a vision of history whose narrative is based on a rhizomatic syntax, on passageways, arabesques and imbrications, provides an exciting framework for a new type of writing from inside of the exhibition setting. I would also point to the reader a book written by the artist and scholar Svetlana Boym (*The Future of Nostalgia*), fragments of which have been included in the exhibition catalogue. Boym proposes a de-linearization of history: for our purposes, writing a linear art history in which the East is integrated in the narratives of the West, should be replaced by a consistent and persevering search for the breaks, ruptures, and gaps. In this mind frame, the process of “recuperating” (East European art) receives form in the task of radically interpreting its invisible phenomena. But, apart of all this, we still need to acknowledge that this exhibition and this text were organized, respectively, published, by an institution which is entirely established in the Western context, and which doesn’t make any secret from the fact that it follows its artistic canons. The de-linearization of history is, thus, announced in a totally linear milieu. Should we interpret this fact as an act of subversion or as recognizance of criticism’s defeat? But, then again, should we really choose between these alternatives? Michel Foucault defined critique as an attitude of being partner and adversary at the same time, of the very structures one criticizes.<sup>2</sup> Could the East see the West, with regard to the former’s writing of its own art history, as both partner and adversary? The conference in Brno offers an interesting moment, an acknowledgement of the fact that we are currently experiencing a crisis in the narratives of art history. There is a hidden danger for the

(East European) subjectivity engaged in *making* history as her fingers are *type-writing* it, that of self-delusion, that of being re-appropriated by the very structures and frameworks that it thinks it has just deconstructed, or at least avoided. The task is then to manage to articulate a position which makes the researcher both partner and adversary of the structures and canons it criticizes.

## Conference schedule

Thursday, 18th November 2010

Welcome and Introduction: Ladislav Kesner (Department of Art History, Masaryk University, Brno), Marek Pokorný (Moravian Gallery), Michael Ann Holly, (Clark Art Institute, Williamstown), Natasha Becker, (Clark Art Institute, Williamstown)

### *Panel I: Localized vs. Globalized Narratives of Art*

(Moderation: Ladislav Kesner, Masaryk University, Brno)

David Bareš (City Gallery, Prague): Piotrowski's "horizontal" art history: problems and perspectives

Maja and Reuben Fowkes (www.translocal.org, London): The Challenge of the Post-National in East European Art History

Anna Brzyski (University of Kentucky): Kunstwissenschaft, World Art History, and Global Art Historic Discourse

Discussants: Keith Moxey (Columbia University, New York), Beat Wyss (Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung, Karlsruhe), Edit Andras (Institute for Art History, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest), Magdalena Moskalewicz (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań)

### *Panel II: Exhibitions as Art History*

(Moderator: Karel Císař (Academy of Art, Architecture and Design, Prague))

Louisa Avgita (City University London): The Rewriting of Art History as Art

Kelly Presutti (J. Paul Getty Foundation, Los Angeles): The Promises of Conducting Art History within the Exhibition Setting

Christopher Nae (George Enescu University of Arts, Iași): Retrospective Exhibitions and Identity Politics: The Capitalization of Criticality in Curatorial Accounts of Eastern European Art After 1989

Discussants: Anca Oroveanu (New Europe College, Bucharest), Sven Spieker (University of California, Santa Barbara), Almira Ousmanova (European Humanities University, Vilnius)

## Endnoten

1. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York 2001.
2. Michel Foucault, Sylvère Lotringer, and Lysa Hochroth, 'What Is Critique?', in: *Semiotext(E)*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, New York 1997, p. 41-82.

Friday, 19th November 2010

*Panel III: Disciplinary and Institutional Frameworks*

Moderation: Keith Moxey, (Columbia University, New York)

Anna Manicka (Muzeum Narodowe, Warsaw): The Dialogue among the Institutions of Art and its Impact on History of Art

Pavλίna Morganová (Academy of Fine Arts, Prague): The Transformation of Art and Art Historical Institutions Following 1989

Mária Orišková (University of Trnava): Welcome to Capitalism: Institutional Dimensions of Art History in Slovakia

Discussants: Ladislav Kesner (Masaryk University Brno), Piotr Piotrowski (Muzeum Narodowe, Warsaw)

*Panel IV: Blind Spots of Art History in Central/Eastern Europe*

Moderation: Michael Ann Holly (Clark Art Institute, Williamstown)

Eva Forgacs (Art Center College of Design, Pasadena): Art History's One Blind Spot in East-Central Europe: Terminology

Martin Horáček (University of Technology, Brno): Architectural History With(out) Theory: The Czech Professional Debate on Architecture After 1989

Juliana Maxim (University of San Diego): Writing the Art History of Totalitarianism: Socialist Realist Painting in Romania, 1950s–60s

Discussants: Kristra Kodres (Institute of Art History, Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn), Steven Mansbach (University of Maryland)

## Author

Daria Ghiu, PhD candidate at the Bucharest Art University and at the SIK-ISEA Zürich within the research project *Die Biennale von Venedig und die Strukturen des Kunstbetriebs*, in which she deals with the topic of the Romanian Pavillon at the Venice Biennale.

## Review

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