

In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989

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In 2001, during a Round Table discussion at the College Art Association Conference in Chicago, the Czech art historian and critic Martina Pachmanová raised the issue of agency in the construction of the dominant narratives of East-Central European art. She was referring to a comprehensive survey of early 20th-century modernism in Eastern Europe, published by the American Steven Mansbach with Cambridge University Press. While stressing her belief in the openness of this area to researchers from within and without the field, Pachmanová raised her concern about the suppression of local voices from the region.⁽¹⁾ The question of the speaking subject, inextricably bound to the choice of interpretive strategies, indicates the discursive nature of any artistic region, the latter issue particularly poignant in the case of the notoriously ill-defined Eastern (Central) Europe. Since that discussion in Chicago, a number of important books and exhibition catalogues proposing new core narratives of East Central European art of the 20th century, perceived as an embraceable cultural entity, pre- and post WWII, have been published. Most of them were produced in the West by other leading Anglophone publishers, virtually all appearing now as multi-author volumes, containing a mixed range of voices from West and East.⁽²⁾

At the time of the event in Chicago, however, at least one of the Round Table discussants must have already had a new book up his sleeve, a study offering a critical analysis of the almost totally unexplored topic of the avant-garde art in the people's democracies during the Cold War. This time, the agency has been taken over by an insider ⁽³⁾, the renowned Polish art historian and expert on the 20th century art and theory across East and West, Piotr Piotrowski. In 2005, his monumental volume *Awangarda w cieniu Ja?ty: Sztuka w Europie ?rodkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945–1989* was published in Poland.⁽⁴⁾ The volume, the first of its kind

giving a critical evaluation of the vicissitudes of post-1945 avant-garde art in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, Eastern Germany, Romania, and to a lesser extent, in Bulgaria, was an outcome of more than 15 years of research, carried out single-handedly by the author in a plethora of museums, galleries and archives, as well as in conversations with artists and curators all over East Central Europe. Piotrowski, the author of many books and provocative articles on the topic (reprinted in a variety of languages in professional art journals from Moscow and Ljubljana to Paris and New York) was indeed best equipped to give a wider picture of modernism behind the Iron Curtain, while following closely multilingual debates on contemporary art, both Western and Eastern. The only drawback of this book was that, written in Polish, it spoke only to a minority of scholars. This lack has now been redressed thanks to Reakcion Books, which has published its English version with an expert translation by Anna Brzyski, the North American art historian specializing in Polish modernism. All of a sudden, the dynamism, richness and complexities of the art worlds of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, Eastern Germany, Romania, and to a lesser extent, in Bulgaria, have been made available to the Anglophone reader.

As stressed by Piotrowski, this mighty volume does not aspire to a status of a 'definitive' reference book of East Central European art after 1945. The underlying research question of the book, as the author explains in the preface, dates back to his student days in the 1970s and to his realization of the notable differences between contemporary art in the people's democracies on the one hand, and, on the other hand, of a generalized western assumption about the overall difference and the homogeneity of the Eastern bloc. The tension between this unified and differentiated image, or between the belief in the defining alterity as seen from without, and the heterogeneity as observed within, underscores Piotrowski's complex argument. The book thus forms a response to the essentialised picture of a 'grey zone of Europe', aiming to fill the gap in the archives of 20th-century avant-gardes, and to revise at the same time their interpretive tools. And yet, instead of the established practice of moving from one country to another and treating them as distinct cultural organisms which produced various versions of modernism, Piotrowski set himself a much more ambitious task. His aim was to outline a comparative cultural geography of East Central European artworlds in close relation to politics, and to do that not in 'ethnic', but in critical terms, by identifying 'particular artistic problems, tendencies, attitudes, and forms of expression' relevant for the region, and to relate them synchronically during the decades marked by the 'shadow of Yalta', between 1945–1989.

Such a strategy implies of course the subscription to the belief in the existence of a perceivable cultural entity named here East Central Europe. And, indeed, the Cold War years do mark the only period when, framed by the Iron Curtain and solidified by a dense network of military and economic institutions, such as the Comecon and the Warsaw Pact, this region acquired a relatively unified political, social as well as cultural identity, distinguishable from other cultural areas of the Cold War world. However, Piotrowski argues, it was not this newly constructed collective identity, but the continuous process of rebellion against it, staged at various speeds and intensity within the Communist bloc, which gave the region its common traits, its shared self. Thus it was the denial of the imposed collectivity which was turned, collectively, into *the* defining feature East Central Europe's cultural identity. Trying to sum up the book in a single phrase: it is the anti-Communist resistance which defines the avant-garde in the shadow of Yalta and which forms the volume's contents.

The real question which had to be addressed at the beginning was: how such a study should be written. Should it focus on the sameness of the trajectories of modernism in the West and East, and in this way only strengthen the existing western canon, not opposing its claim to universality and superiority? Or, should it rather aim at 'fashioning a perspective that would emphasize the "otherness" of [this] part of Europe' (p. 12), while at the same time redefining the criteria of alterity from the position of the marginalized? It was this second, more difficult and open-ended option which has been chosen by the author. The first chapter of the book, methodological in nature, puts forward precepts of a new critical geography of art, as devised by Piotrowski. Instead of relying on site-specificity or the *genius loci* of the old *Kunstgeographie*, it hinges around the relations between culture and politics. It alerts to the discursive nature of any art-historical and critical endeavour and, following Bryson and Derrida, to the constructed nature of 'contexts' which are nothing else than processes of framing. As stated by the author:

The art of Czechoslovakia, Romania and Hungary developed in different semiotic and ideological spaces than the art of France or Italy. The universal perspective, understood as a methodological tool, prevents one from reaching particular meanings of culture and from describing its regional, national and local identities. ... This task may be performed by problems raised within critical art geography (p. 24).

And he explains that

The new geography of East-Central Europe must ... encompass ... the entire range of historic factors, appearing on the juncture between traditions, definitions of place situated within local tensions, mythologies, inferiority complexes, political and social structures and, on the other side, [it should take into account] cultural trajectories, reception of cultural models, and export and import of artistic and other processes. Culture of ... post-war East Central-Europe cannot be comprehended without such a complex analysis. Or, to put it in a different way, without it it will be perceived exclusively as a periphery for Western Europe (p. 29).

What follows is a sequence of mental maps which outline the different political circumstances, functions and the dynamics of Cold War modernisms in the people's democracies. The book is divided into five major chapters. After the methodological introduction, the second chapter focuses on the short period between 1945 and 1948, preceding the wholesale imposition of the doctrine of socialist realism. It presents the variety of surrealist practices in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, while pointing to different ways in which surrealism was 'instrumentalised' in the first acts of resistance against the official cultural politics, especially in Poland. The next chapter 'Modernism and Totalitarianism', divided into sections on *informel*, geometric abstraction, new figuration, pop-art and goes straight to the late 1950s and 1960s, totally ignoring the episode of socialist realism. The latter, nonetheless, is evoked in the book as a constant negative reference, a yard-stick against which all other artistic practices are measured (p. 10). Piotrowski reiterates here his views expressed earlier, blaming the traumatic experience of socialist realism in the countries such as Poland or Czechoslovakia for the virtual absence of the politically-involved avant-gardes in this part of Europe, and for the prevalent belief in the autonomy of art, in its redemptive potential in face of the totalitarianism threat. Piotrowski's provocative discussions with Rosalind Krauss's critique of the myth of the modernist grid and its application to East Central Europe (pp. 139–44), and with Benjamin Buchloch's assessment of the return to figuration as retrogressive (pp. 173–74), are particularly stimulating to both the Eastern and the Western reader. Another ample chapter looks at the various manifestations of the neo-avant-garde of the 1970s, focusing on conceptual art and body art, and their engagement in the identity and gender politics. The final chapter functions as an epilogue, and, according to the narrative adopted by Piotrowski, outlines the artistic movements of the 1980s, from neo-expressionism to performance, which both referred to and contributed to the end of Communism.

Piotrowski's book is a truly ground breaking publication, both in its scope and in its critical approach, in its engagement with theory and with artistic practice as well as with the wider geopolitical framework of the Cold War. It provides plenty of illuminating insights into the pages of post-1945 avant-gardes and their discourses in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, Eastern Germany, Romania, and to a lesser extent, in Bulgaria. Its value, however, lies not only in digging through the existing literature in various local languages (without the familiar complaints about their inaccessibility), but also in making unexpected connections with cultural theory, such as Foucault's panopticism, Barthesian mythologies, or Derridean aporias. In this way, Piotrowski contextualizes the shifting kaleidoscope of artworlds in the Other Europe within a wider realm of debates at the heart of contemporary art criticism. Remarkably, the book is not addressed solely to the 'ignorant' western audience, but equally so to the contemporary Eastern European reader, whose knowledge about the art of other 'brotherly countries' is also likely to be minimal.

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Notes

1. 'Central and East European art and culture, 1945 to the present', *Art Margins*, 15 October 2001 [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Central European Avant-gardes: Exchange and Transformation*, ed. Timothy O. Benson (Cambridge, MA, 2002); *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1919–1930*, ed. Timothy O. Benson and Eva Forgacs (Cambridge, MA, 2002); *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, ed. Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszył (Cambridge, MA, 2002); *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in Eastern Bloc*, ed. David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (New York, NY, 2002); *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition*, ed. Aleš Erjavec, foreword by Martin Jay (Berkeley, CA, 2003); *Over the Wall/ After the Fall: Post-Communist Cultures Through an East -West Gaze*, ed. Sibelan Forrester, Magdalena J. Zaborowska and Elena Gapova (Bloomington, IN, 2004); and two most recent positions: Elizabeth Clegg, *Art, Design and Architecture of Central Europe 1890–1920* (New Haven, CT, 2006); *East Art Map Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, ed. IRWIN (Cambridge, MA, 2006). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. It is important to mention here an even earlier book by another insider, the Slovak art historian Mariá

Orišková , which addressed the exclusion of East European art from western art history, pointing to the existence of two separate art histories, East and West, and their respective limitations in approaching the whole field of European art. She presented an interesting analysis of the 'dissident paradigm' of East-Central European avant-gardes in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland pre-1989 in which, given the context of its production, the manifestly apolitical art should be read as a latent political statement, redeeming in this curious way the modernist claim of the autonomy of art: Mariá Orišková, *Dvojhlasné dejiny umenia* (Bratislava, 2002).[Back to \(3\)](#)

4. Piotr Piotrowski, *Awangarda w cieniu Ja?ty: Sztuka w Europie ?rodkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945-1989* (Pozna?, 2005).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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