

Extending the Dialogue

**Essays by Igor Zabel Award Laureates,
Grant Recipients, and Jury Members, 2008–2014**

Edit András

**What Does
East-Central
European
Art History
Want?**

**Reflections on the
Art History Discourse
in the Region
since 1989**

Art historian and critic Edit András re-examines the thought of the late Piotr Piotrowski, particularly his call for regionally specific art histories, in the light of recent political developments in Europe. Seeing as problematic, and perhaps even dangerous, attempts to assert a distinct regional perspective at a time when nationalism is all-pervasive, she points to recent shifts in the academic discourse toward arguments in favour of a reinvented universalism. She goes on to reflect on the present situation in Hungary, where the Viktor Orbán's ruling nationalist government has been shaping the cultural and academic landscape to its own ends, and examines some of pitfalls in the critical response to such encroachments.

If, as is frequently claimed, art history in general is today in crisis, then East-Central European art history¹ has its own, recurring, crisis, as it is unable to settle and secure its position vis-à-vis the rest of the world and so is constantly forced to reposition itself. Here I am not concerned with the post-1989 need to rewrite local art histories without ideological and political constraints; rather, I am interested in an art history discourse that can address the international community in a way that facilitates communication rather than reinforces separation. Nor am I concerned here with the involvement of Western scholars who contribute to the art history of the region – despite the tangible change in their attitude in the the post-Cold War period, where there has been a shift from the earlier “neo-colonialist” attitude that established academic careers on the “invasion” of the region without any knowledge of the local languages and contexts – but with considerable financial support – to the younger generation of scholars who conduct local research in the local languages and take a less partial approach than the natives, since they are less susceptible to local blind spots and taboos. Instead, I am interested in changes in the region's self-image and self-definition and its constant urge to redefine its position within the discourse of global art history; I conceive this urge as a reflection on the haunting dilemma of belonging. This study looks for the reasons and factors behind this compulsive need and seeks to detect the methods and goals of the repositioning. The effort to register the diverse and sometimes opposing positions of art history discourse in the region has been triggered by the recent shift in arguments in favour of greater cosmopolitanism and a reinvented universalism, which I believe is the counter-effect of the nationalisms and populisms that are currently on the rise, from which the discourse of art history certainly wishes to detach itself.

The Identity Crisis of Art History

For quite a while now, art history's traditional position has been heavily criticized, ignored, or challenged in the crossfire of such new critical disciplines as visual culture studies, cultural studies, gender studies, etc., for being reluctant to leave behind certain obsolete tenets inherited from the period in which it was born and enjoyed its heyday. The 19th-century origins of the discipline provided both the transnational connectedness of

¹ The terminology used for naming the region that was known during the Cold War as the Eastern or Soviet bloc has had a diverse trajectory since the collapse of the socialist satellite system. Lately the term “East-Central Europe” has been widely adopted by scholars, including Piotr Piotrowski, and since the arguments in this essay are largely based on his writings, I also use this term.

the art scenes of Europe, in the spirit of Enlightenment universalism, as well as the potential for writing national art histories by focusing on local configurations and mutations. Since art history's birth coincided with the emergence of nation states in Europe, the two notions intermingled and art history and its institutions became effective tools in nation building. In the blossoming of the 20th-century modernist paradigm, two competing but nevertheless parallel inner streams (the national and the transnational) were placed in a strictly vertical, hierarchical order. In this construction, the centres, where new ideas and concepts were born, gained a crucial, defining, and normative position, while the peripheries slid into an inferior position that labelled them as clumsy, impure, belated followers.

Maverick Cold War Modernism

The political division during the Cold War was replicated in the divided construction of the art discourse. The split between the Western and Eastern European paradigms of art and their different directions during the Cold War have been extensively discussed, as well as the reason why the art scenes of Eastern Europe, even if to differing degrees, insisted on the basic tenets of modernism well until the end of 1980s, without foregrounding the gradual deconstruction of the modernist paradigm, which started in the West in the 1960s. There is scholarly agreement that modernism represented an umbilical cord to the European culture "behind the wall" and provided as well a distinction from the official culture. As the official culture appropriated realism and socio-political issues, at least in its rhetoric, the underground and countercultural art scenes were resistant to micro-political sensitivity, and the rise of critical theories and identity politics was overlooked. In order to maintain a certain unity among those in opposition, any subculture or distinct identity (such as gender, Jewishness, ethnicity, etc.) represented the threat of dissolution and so was suppressed. With the consolidation of existing socialism, modernism fossilized behind the Iron Curtain even as, on the other side, the paradigm shift was coming into full swing.

These divergent trajectories of the two parts of Europe were supported by a kind of silent, unspoken agreement. The East's "laggard" condition, in contrast to the mainstream discourse of the West, which was regarded as relevant, satisfied the liberal intelligence of the trendsetting centres. The socialist East provided a projection field for imagining art as a powerful political weapon in society, one that was lost in capitalist conditions, where the importance of art rarely exceeded that of a mere commodity.²

2 See Edit András, "A Painful Farewell to Modernism: Difficulties in the Period of Transition" (1997), in *Gender Check: A Reader: Art and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed. Bojana

After the political changes of 1989, the carefully maintained status quo was thrown off and the illusion of an art with a strong politically oppositional content dissolved; the East was accused of being stuck in an obsolete paradigm, namely modernism, while the West was accused of letting down its Eastern fellow travellers, who hoped to be treated equally and were puzzled by the turnaround. The exotic character of the socialist East in the eyes of the beholder simply disappeared overnight, while the East's maverick modernism lost its validity at a single blow. The changing social, political, and discursive conditions inevitably triggered an urgent need for repositioning the interpretative frame of art in the region, which was accompanied by the fervent desire of art historians and others to initiate dialogue with the trendsetting centres and to carve out a space for themselves.

The discursive attempt to abandon the notion of a homogeneous region and disengage from the concept of the Eastern bloc by constructing subregions (e.g. the Balkans, the Baltic States, Central Europe, etc.) was fuelled by the impulse to add colour to the zone behind the wall, which in the Cold War era had been perceived as grey. The geopolitical scope of the last regionally encompassing exhibition and conference, *After the Wall*,³ in 1999, was criticized even at the time of its presentation. The identity-building process coincided with and was supported by a similar political process of disintegration and realignment – the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union and the formation of the Visegrád Group of countries. The post-socialist countries' efforts to underscore their specific characters and local features was further motivated by a competition to gain access to the now-available identity market.⁴ In line with the intense media coverage of the bloody collapse of Yugoslavia, the Balkans received the lion's share of attention in the Western art world, as was evidenced by a string of exhibitions that hyped their Balkan content.⁵

The newly regained democracy in the region was accompanied by new self-awareness. Different cultural agents now felt entitled to claim emancipation in their own fields by criticizing and decentring the canon, that is, retrospectively deconstructing its hierarchical and unequal historical construction, as well as by detecting traces of hidden surviving elements of biased interpretations of contemporary art in both the centres and the

Pejić, Erste Foundation, and the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne, 2010, pp. 115–125.

3 See *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, ed. David Elliott and Bojana Pejić, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1999.

4 See Boris Groys, "Beyond Diversity: Cultural Studies and Its Post-Communist Other", *Art Power*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2008, pp. 149–164.

5 Notably, *In Search of Balkania* (curated by Roger Conover, Eda Čufer, and Peter Weibel), Neue Galerie, Graz, Austria, 2002; *In the Gorges of the Balkans: A Report* (curated by René Block), Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany, 2003; *Balkan Consulate: Contemporary Art in Southeastern Europe* (curated by Margarethe Makovec, Anton Lederer, and Lejla Hodžić), <rotor>, Graz, Austria, 2003; and *Blood & Honey: The Future's in the Balkans* (curated by Harald Szeemann), Essl Museum, Klosterneuburg, Austria, 2003.



fig. 1

Piotr Piotrowski at the Igor Zabel Award for Culture and Theory ceremony, MACBA, Barcelona, 2010.

Photo by David Campos. Courtesy of ERSTE Foundation.

margins. The post-socialist countries' cultural vacuum, caused by modernism's lost relevance on the global art scene, could successfully be filled with means of a postcolonial discourse, which provided conceptual tools for deconstructing the position imposed on the peripheries, in which Eastern Europe could easily imagine itself. The now-awakened "subaltern" of "the universal art history" could make great use of the term and notion of the "Other", as borrowed from postcolonial discourse, and adapt this theoretical concept to its "semi-other" condition, which was similar to, if not quite the same as (but nor was it the direct opposite), the situation in countries that had been subject to actual colonization. Numerous scholars contributed to the discourse, nuancing the in-between position of the region.⁶ The postcolonial discourse was so influential in Eastern Europe – despite a lack of colonial experience in the literal sense – that it was applied even to Russia's position within the Soviet Union, provoking a heated debate over whether the applicability of the theory and concept could be extended in this way.⁷ To explain the peripheries' "gladly accepted" position of submission, a very popular but immensely problematic local enterprise developed, namely, the elaboration of the concept of "self-colonization".⁸

6 See, for example, Igor Zabel, "Intimacy and Society: Post-communist or Eastern Art?", *Contemporary Art Theory*, ed. Igor Španjol, JRP-Ringier and Les presses du réel, Zurich and Dijon, 2012, pp. 80–109; Bojana Pejić, "The Dialectics of Normality", in *After the Wall*, pp. 16–28 (see n. 3); Piotr Piotrowski, "The Grey Zone of Europe", in *After the Wall*, pp. 35–41; Marina Gržinić, *Fiction Reconstructed: Eastern Europe, Post-Socialism and the Retro-Avantgarde*, edition selene and Springerin, Vienna, 2000.

7 See Ekaterina Degot, "How to Qualify for Postcolonial Discourse?", *ArtMargins Online*, November 2, 2001, <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/325-how-to-qualify-for-postcolonial-discourse>; Ekaterina Degot, "How to Obtain the Right to Post-Colonial Discourse?", *Moscow Art Magazine*, http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/moscow-art-magazine/how-to-obtain-the-right/view_print/; Margaret Dikovitskaya, "A Response to Ekaterina Degot's Article: Does Russia Qualify for Postcolonial Discourse?", *ArtMargins Online*, January 31, 2002, <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/324-a-response-to-ekaterina-dyogots-article-does-russia-qualify-for-postcolonial-discourse> (all accessed April 21, 2016).

8 See, for example, Alexander Kiossev, "Notes on Self-colonising Cultures", in *After the Wall*, pp. 114–118; and Edit András, "Blind Spot of the New Critical Theory: Notes on the Theory of Self-colonization", in *The Art and Media of Accession: Trans-European Picnic*, ed. kuda.org, Nat Muller, and Stephen Kovats, Futura publikacije, Novi Sad, Serbia, 2004, pp. 38–47.

Regional Pride, the Post-Cold War Empowerment of the Margins

Confrontation with post-Cold War conditions, and their rearranged but still unequal power relations, generated diverse feelings among scholars in the post-socialist countries. These included not only disappointment, anger, and criticism over unequal treatment,⁹ but also the fear of losing the attention associated with the privileged position of the “Cold War Other”.¹⁰ Piotr Piotrowski’s theory of horizontal art history changed the orientation of the positioning, literally inverting the loci of the region’s art history and challenging the centric position of the canon (fig. 1). He offered a positive solution for how overcoming the limitations of the binary opposition. He juxtaposed the diverse art histories of the centres and the margins and put them on the same level, removing any hierarchical or subordinate relations between them. According to this theory, the necessary act of levelling should be twofold; the manoeuvre of “localizing” the centre should go hand-in-hand with an analogue process on the other side, namely: “The Other must also take a fresh look at itself, define its position and the place from which it speaks.”¹¹ Anger and frustration are channelled into empowerment, for “one can see much more from the margins” than from the centre – a notion that lies at the core of Piotrowski’s thought.¹² The position on the margins is much more privileged, Piotrowski postulates, as the centre “quite often unconsciously, due to the ideology of [the] universalization of modern art, ignores the significance of place. ... If art is universal, the place from which it speaks does not matter.”¹³ He believed that even the centre can benefit from the marginal perspective as “the history of the art of the centre, and the global history of modern art that developed out of it, has a chance to revise its self-perception in light of the studies focused on the periphery, horizontal art history or art histories”.¹⁴ However, he was well aware that the newly proposed position was not at all self-evident and required intellectual

- 9 See Edit András, “Dog Eat Dog: Who is in Charge of Controlling Art in Post-socialist Condition?”, *Third Text: Socialist Eastern Europe*, special issue, ed. Reuben Fowkes, vol. 23, no. 96, January 2009, pp. 65–78; and Igor Zabel, “Dialogue”, in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, ed. Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospyszil, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2002, pp. 355–356.
- 10 Groys, “Beyond Diversity”, pp. 149–164.
- 11 Piotr Piotrowski, “On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History”, *Umění / Art*, no. 5, 2008, p. 380.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid., p. 381.
- 14 Ibid.

and psychological efforts from both sides. Piotrowski promoted the perspective provided by critical theory in order to gain access to the global discourse, but in the same measure, he vigorously advocated the need for self-empowerment, namely, that those on the margins should value their own marginal position, its peculiarity, its diverse historical experiences, and its constant alertness. He relentlessly opposed identification with the submissive position and the consequent inferiority complex.

Piotrowski initiated the seminar series “Unfolding Narratives: Art Histories in East-Central Europe after 1989” in order to discuss the urgent questions of art history writing in the region.¹⁵ The seminars, which were held in different parts of the region in 2010 and 2011, had a favourable impact on the local self-image and may have positively influenced the attitude of certain leading institutions as well. For example, a new initiative at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, “Global Research at MoMA: Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives” (C-MAP),¹⁶ was now able to rely on this professional self-awareness. Sanja Iveković’s solo exhibition *Sweet Violence*, held at MoMA in 2011–2012, also demonstrated a changed attitude towards the peripheries, one that was less elitist and controlling and more inclusive and attentive.¹⁷ However, old habits die hard. The exhibition *Ostalgie*, at the New Museum in New York in 2011, can be viewed as a backlash. It showed how difficult it is to give up the privileged dominant position and accept a shared terrain based on equal and mutual recognition.¹⁸ Another MoMA show, *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980*, in 2015, revealed the inner dynamic of the changing discourse in its careful attempt to avoid the pitfalls of the *Ostalgie* exhibition; instead, it went to the other extreme. While *Transmissions* did not exoticize the displayed works, as the New Museum had done, it sterilized them by completely eliminating the different political contexts and by avoiding anything that recalled the dissimilar historical and socio-political conditions in which the artworks originated. It clearly manifested the kind of museological operation that puts artefacts through a “purification” process in which they, and the ideas associated with them, are

- 15 The series of three travelling seminars was organized by the Research and Academic Programme of the Clark Art Institute, in collaboration with regional partners. See more at <http://www.clarkart.edu/rap/about> (accessed April 21, 2016).
- 16 C-MAP is a research and exchange initiative at MoMA that looks at art in a global context. It is divided into three groups, each focusing on a geographic region with a strong history of modernism. The current focus areas are Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, and Latin America. For more information see <http://www.moma.org/learn/intnlprograms/globalresearch> (accessed April 21, 2016).
- 17 See Edit András, “The Ex-Eastern Bloc’s Position in the New Critical Theories and in the Recent Curatorial Practice”, *IDEA*, no. 40, 2011, pp. 79–96.
- 18 See Edit András, “Whose Nostalgia is Ostalgie? An Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics Survey Exhibition in the New Museum, New York”, in *Curating ‘Eastern Europe’ and Beyond: Art Histories through the Exhibition*, ed. Mária Orišková, Veda, SAS Publishing House, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, and Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, Frankfurt am Main, 2013, pp. 165–171.

cleansed of political and ideological “dirt”, regardless of changes in the art-historical paradigm. Artworks from the socialist countries of the Cold War era became polished artefacts, art treasures of the museum, in the very same way that works from the revolutionary Russian avant-garde, with its radical social ideas, are domesticated in neutral displays for mass entertainment in various leading museums.

Piotrowski was conscious of the paradox that equality might come at the price of losing local, and especially national, specificities, peculiarities, and subtle distinctions. While the concept of horizontal art history has mostly been praised, his dilemma with regard to national art history is largely overlooked and unrecognized. As he argues, the key problem of horizontal art history is the problem of localization: “We have the ‘history of modern art’ with no local specification, while on the other hand [outside the centre] we have all kinds [of] adjectives specifying the regional.”¹⁹ Reflecting on the “global turn” in the humanities, he observed in 2008 that the type of locality related to the structure of nation states and the modernist form of nationalism “is now changing on account of the process of globalization,” specifically with “the transformation of nation-states into more cosmopolitan organizations”.²⁰ However, despite the enthusiasm of the time, he was still hesitant to accept that locality had disappeared as an identity marker:

The “nation” seen from a postmodern perspective is deprived of its essential features. Post-colonial scholarly practice, however, relies on the essence of the nation to define its critical strategy and resistance to the centre. On the one hand, in international horizontal art history, operating with the “notion” of the “nation”, there must be a defence [of] the (national) subject. It is thus closer to the post-colonial interpretation than to the postmodern.²¹

Piotrowski tried to syncretize the two streams in his vision, stating that “horizontal art history written from a micro perspective, by contrast, has to make a critique of the essence of the national subject, has to deconstruct it, in order to defend the culture of the ‘Other’ against the national mainstream”. He came up with the solution of transnational, regional art history narratives, which negotiate values and concepts along lines other than the opposition between national and international.

19 Piotrowski, “On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History”, p. 381.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., p. 382.

National Art History Fights Back

This ideal solution, however, seemed to fade or become immersed in wishful thinking as the ghost of nationalism and isolationist and parochial national art histories came to the forefront in the everyday reality of post-socialist countries. One of topics addressed in the “Unfolding Narratives” seminars was the notion of time, in which connection the issue of nascent nationalism popped up in 2011, at the seminar in Bucharest.²² What excited me then were the inbuilt flaws that – despite the premise of multiple and non-hierarchical temporalities advocated by the critical theories of contemporaneity – still haunted those who had had a “secondary time” in the long period of modernity, with its hierarchical arrangement of places and imposed time-measuring system. I was interested in the leftovers of the concept of the universal flow of time, in which those in the centre, in canon-setting positions, hold possession of the time of the present. In the paradigm of modernism, the time of the “East European Other” was considered the past, the prehistory and memory of the “relevant present”, which was associated with Western Europe. However, despite the change in paradigm, substantial discrepancies could be detected between the conceptions of the synchronicity of the present time in the advanced theory of contemporaneity, and between the hidden implications of hierarchies with regard to the different pasts. In other words, while we gladly acknowledge that the dominance of the privileged present of the centres has evaporated in our postcolonial time, when it comes to remembering or dealing with the past, the discourse falls short and the past needs to be adjusted by the “old-time others”. When and what is remembered still needs to be synchronized to the disguised yet powerful “prime time”.

While the remembrance of socialism was flawlessly channelled into a Western way of understanding, the unresolved and still disturbing legacies of nation building in the eastern part of Europe,²³ along with imagined or real wounds and unfulfilled desires, were regarded as untimely issues for the trendsetting Western discourse. Charles King, an American political scientist, accused the region of being obsessed with “cliophilia” – *the obsessive concern with finding explanations for contemporary political troubles in the distant troubled past*, which “has sometimes been a brake to comprehending real world politics”.²⁴ His claim, indeed, echoes the deep-

22 The Bucharest seminar, the third in the series, took place May 20–21, 2011. For more about the programme, see <http://www.clarkart.edu/rap/RAP-Events/Event-58> (accessed April 21, 2016).

23 See Edit András, “An Agent Still at Work: The Trauma of Collective Memory of the Socialist Past”, *Springerlin*, no. 3, 2008, <http://www.springerlin.at/dyn/heft.php?id=56&pos=1&textid=2103&lang=en> (accessed April 21, 2016).

24 Charles King, *Extreme Politics: Nationalism, Violence, and the End of Eastern Europe*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2010, p. 181.

seated desire of Western academia to describe its Eastern counterpart as being absorbed in its own past and in its own history.

The climate of re-awakening nationalisms and their memories reveals a further twist, specifically, with regard to the genealogy of nation states, where we find even East-East differences, with the notion of time diverging between the different states. For example, Hungarians tend to view the Trianon Peace Treaty²⁵ as a punitive dismemberment and the end of an era, while non-Hungarians see it as part of the process of decolonization and the birth of their new nation states, and as such, the beginning of a new era. During the Cold War, Trianon was a taboo issue for socialist countries, but this boomerang came back with a vengeance when the satellite countries of the Soviet Union regained their sovereignty. Right-wing political forces on both sides of the Hungarian border have played the national card, and there is a heated rivalry over whose conception of time should be accepted by the international community. Thus, despite the tolerance for the synchronicity of different time settings that is promoted by recent critical theories, when the issue is remembering the recent past of socialism, and even more, the origins of nation building by the East-European Other, the position of control is activated by the “prime-timers”, who impose their own time frame for memory. However, on the margins, notions of time differ greatly from those that have dominated scholarly debates and trends, both before and after the Cold War era, and that tend to push aside certain issues, considering them irrelevant and untimely.

At the “Unfolding Narratives” seminar in Bucharest, in a country that had directly benefited from Trianon, mention of the 1920 treaty caused a certain discomfort, to judge by the anxious reactions of the audience. On the one hand, the topic triggered unconscious and inherent national feelings and created tensions, leading to complaints about hurting people’s feelings. On the other hand, it appeared obvious that the time was not yet ripe for elaborating these sensitive issues, even within the scholarly community. Applying a psychological metaphor, we can say that the suppressed unconscious of art history, namely, the national art histories, was interfering with the idea of a horizontal art history. At the time, for the Western participants at the seminar, the question of nation building and nationalism seemed distant and obsolete, an outdated and inconvenient topic, given that the violent formation of the West European nation states is generally regarded as a settled issue, one that was long ago normalized and integrated into history; for people from the East, however, the issue was still an embarrassing topic that hit close to home.

Five years ago, of course, none of us could have been aware of how far we would go from the “innocent” symbolic politics of Hungary, which was addressed in Bucharest, to today’s scenery, or, as Boris Buden has formulated

25 The Trianon Peace Treaty, signed on June 4, 1920, was imposed by the victors of World War I; it deprived Hungary of two-thirds of its territory and placed millions of ethnic Hungarians under the rule of neighbouring countries, including Austria and the newly founded nation states of Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia.



fig. 2

Police protecting the *Nazi Occupation Monument* on Freedom Square, Budapest, March 2014.

Photo by Gabriella Csozó / FreeDoc.



fig. 3

Photographs showing *Living Memorial* (across the street from the *Nazi Occupation Monument*), Budapest, ongoing project initiated by Free Artists, March 23, 2014–present.

Photos by Gabriella Csozó / FreeDoc.

OBITUARY

MŰCSARNOK / KUNSTHALLE BUDAPEST

1896 - 2013

It is with profound grief that we regretfully inform you of the death of Műcsarnok, the Budapest Kunsthalle, which after a period of dignified suffering passed away at the age of 117. The cause of death was neglect and the irresponsible behaviour of the institution that goes by the name of the Hungarian Academy of Arts (MMA).

The Műcsarnok was built in the year of Hungarian millennium celebrations and brought down by the System of National Cooperation. Its professional activities were completely liquidated by the MMA.

Responsibility for the death of the Műcsarnok lies with those who inserted the MMA into the constitution and as an act of faith transferred to it one of the most important places of Hungarian contemporary art, as well as those who voted for these proposals in Parliament.

May the Műcsarnok rest in peace.

8 October 2013

United for Contemporary Art



fig. 4

Obituary - Műcsarnok / Kunsthalle, 1896-2013,
Budapest, October 8, 2013.

Photo by Gabriella Csozó / FreeDoc.

fig. 5

Mourning ceremony in front of Műcsarnok / Kunsthalle,
Budapest, October 8, 2013.

Photo by Gabriella Csozó / FreeDoc.



fig. 6

“Raining money” action at the Vigadó Concert Hall, Budapest. The demonstration was co-organized by the Tranzit Action Group and Free Artists, March 14, 2014.

Photo by Gabriella Csozó / FreeDoc.



fig. 7

“Occupy Ludwig” action, Budapest, May 2013. Organized by United for Contemporary Art and Free Artists.

Photo by Gabriella Csozó / FreeDoc.

it from today’s perspective, that the Hungarian case would be “so exemplary for the production of national pasts generally”.²⁶ In Buden’s view, Hungarian nationalism is, in political terms, simply a single, albeit striking, example of how nations construct their past. From this perspective, what generates interest nowadays is “not dealing with a traumatic past but rather, Hungary’s traumatic dealing with the past”.²⁷

The Hungarian Patient

Almost two decades after the fall of Communism, the main concern and obsession of Hungary’s re-elected right-wing government is to recreate a strong national state while claiming that the process of political change was not completed by the previous liberal-leftist-socialist regimes. The process of renationalization and centralization, which comes with the territory, is ambitious and all-encompassing, ranging from history writing to memory politics, from public monuments and cultural heritage management to state subsidies of culture, from cultural institutions and media policy to education, along with the complete change of elites. No institution has been able to elude state control. Disciplines and ideas outside the state-supported culture are condemned to starvation, lacking the necessary institutional and financial support and without access to most media outlets, which are owned or controlled by the regime. So state control and centralization, as well as the drive for renationalization, goes deep in today’s Hungary.

The rightist rhetoric is that Hungarian sovereignty was lost during two consecutive occupations, first by the Nazis then by the Soviets. A recently erected monument dedicated to “all victims of Nazi occupation”²⁸ has stirred a heated public debate, with opponents to the monument accusing the regime of falsifying history by rejecting any Hungarian responsibility in the Holocaust (figs. 2–3). A second site heavily loaded with symbolic politics is Kossuth Square, in front of the Parliament, which offers visitors a way to travel back in time to the mid-20th century, as its 1944 display has been meticulously reconstructed with newly commissioned, reconstructed replicas of the statues that once decorated the square during the inter-war, irredentist period.

At this point we should note that the post-socialist condition does not mean that socialist conditions have disappeared or that we have got past them. Rather, the term signifies an inherent, easy transformability, a

²⁶ From my correspondence with Boris Buden in 2015.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See Edit András, “Vigorous Flagging in the Heart of Europe: The Hungarian Homeland under the Right-Wing Regime”, *e-flux journal*, no. 57, 2014, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/vigorous-flagging-in-the-heart-of-europe-the-hungarian-homeland-under-the-right-wing-regime/> (accessed April 21, 2016).

smooth shift from one type of authoritarianism (socialist) to another (nationalist and populist) with an equally normative understanding of art and culture. As the interpretation of the past always serves the political interest of the present, the regime of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has devoted itself to bringing the present in line with an imagined past. Accordingly, art and culture, along with their institutions, have been in every aspect transformed so as to favour the regime and its cultural policy.

The regime's goal has been to support "national culture within the culture of the nation",²⁹ an idea that Piotrowski vehemently opposed in his definition of national art history. In order to achieve the dominance of a national culture, the bastions of the profession have gradually been occupied by loyal commissars of the official culture. The Hungarian Art Academy (MMA), a kind of shadow ministry that evolved from a private organization into a public body enshrined in the constitution, assumed leadership of the officially supported culture and eventually came to dominate the entire art scene while enjoying enormous state support. Today it has control over state subsidies, in that its delegates, together with the representatives of the cultural ministry (now called the Ministry of Human Resources), make up two thirds of the membership of the National Cultural Foundation.³⁰ After taking over the Múcsarnok, Budapest's main contemporary art venue, and installing its loyal supporters in leadership positions in other institutions as well – despite large demonstrations in protest³¹ (figs. 4–7) – the MMA claimed a professional legitimacy that went beyond even its own inner circles. It then changed its strategy, and instead of an open attack, started to further divide what remained of the sporadic resistance, specifically, by courting those who faced serious financial problems and were willing to collaborate with it.

The consolidation of the reinvented nation state and the institutional dominance of a conservative cultural politics influences the operation of all segments of the art scene, from curatorial practice to art criticism. OFF-Biennale Budapest,³² which took place in 2015, managed to operate outside the state-sponsored, state-dictated culture by relying on private and foreign support, but in a climate of total state control it was difficult even for this independent initiative to maintain any radical positions. OFF-Biennale was declaratively not against the official culture but rather offered an alternative parallel structure. Its core programme was not about questioning the non-democratic conditions of the art scene under

29 Ibid.

30 More about MMA can be found at <https://nemma.noblogs.org/2012/12/07/a-short-history-of-mma/> (accessed April 12, 2016).

31 The NEMMA blog (its Hungarian name means "No to the Hungarian Art Academy") contains important information about these protests. The blog was established and is maintained by the artist Szabolcs KissPál, one of the founders of Free Artists, a group of radical opponents to the cultural politics of the ruling regime. See <https://nemma.noblogs.org/category/english/> (accessed April 21, 2016).

32 See the OFF-Biennale's website, <http://offbiennale.hu/what-is-off/> (accessed April 21, 2016).

nationalism, but rather sought to establish an alternative terrain in which contemporary art could survive. As Dóra Hegyi succinctly put it, OFF-Biennale did not try to directly reflect on the current political situation since the concept of democracy appeared to be a secondary principle for the organizers. They did not begin with the idea that a cultural scene based on a critical conception was a precondition for democracy.³³ Indeed, they found themselves in the same dilemma as the theoreticians: either to explain to the international art world why they were neglecting the local situation or to address local concerns and apply a local perspective. Because they were trying to achieve both national and international professional recognition by involving well-known "star" artists and curators, both foreign and Hungarian, the initiative bore a certain unavoidable duality and was caught between the globalized art world and the localized, nationalized reality.³⁴ These two sides proved irreconcilable.

Artists, critics, and art historians are all facing their own dilemmas in this period of the consolidation and normalization of Hungarian nationalism, or, as others have put it, the total establishment of a mafia state.³⁵ The moral and professional dilemma is whether it is justified to criticize the flaws and minor mistakes of alternative efforts in a context where artists with democratic or critical ideas are being systematically excluded from the art scene and communities are being dismantled. As a theatre critic bluntly put it last year during a radio broadcast about art criticism in Hungary: at a time of dictatorship, a negative review reads like denunciation and persecution. As an art critic on the radio show accurately summarized: it is very difficult to handle criticism if the social model is that criticism is non-existent in the society and not part of daily life. The attitude that politicians and public figures cannot be questioned or criticized permeates all layers of society. But as Boris Buden observed, the example of Hungary, while striking, is not untypical of the region, and other countries, such as Poland and Croatia, may soon follow it.³⁶

33 Dóra Hegyi, quoted in Gábor András, "A Survey after the First OFF-Biennale from Budapest: Alternative, Hope and Chances for Survival", *IDEA*, no. 47, 2015, p. 51.

34 The organizers faced a number of dilemmas: 1. Should the biennial define itself as part of the global "entertainment industry" of art biennials? 2. Should it try to draw attention to Hungarian contemporary artists? 3. Should it try to bring these artists into the "grand competition" and include them in the international art market? 4. Or, conversely, should it try to bring famous foreign artists and curators to Hungary? 5. Should it present artistic practices and discourses that reflect on the current situation in Hungary?

35 See Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State: The Case of Hungary*, Central European University Press and Noran Libro, Budapest.

36 In private correspondence with me in 2015.

What Is to Be Done with Regional Art History?

Although it may seem more virulent in the post-socialist countries, methods of governance in which nationalism is closely entwined with populism can no longer be consigned exclusively to territories that lie on the other side of the former Iron Curtain or in its still-existing shadow. Similarly, the academic discourse of nationalism can no longer be regarded as something that does not concern the West or that is merely a historical issue, a past that is now over. Borders are being crossed, and closed, throughout the continent. The genie of xenophobia, hatred, and racism has been let out of the bottle and looms even over affluent countries where the foundations of wealth and well-being appear to be at stake. The Enlightenment values of universal humanism, world citizenship, and emancipation, which for a long time Europe seemed to take for granted, are now being shaken and seem to fade in the midst of people in motion.

The changing political landscape of Europe has slowly altered the rhetoric, urgencies, alliances, and agencies of academic discourse as well. The attempt to apply a regional perspective at a time of pervasive nationalism – that is, Piotrowski’s project of subverting the hierarchical position of different art histories by positioning them in a horizontal relation, instead of integration and subordination – seems to be blown away and has lost its relevance, or rather, lost its reality, as universal values must nowadays be defended and argued for. In my view, the underlying concept of the conference entitled “East European Art Seen from Global Perspectives: Past and Present”, which Piotrowski initiated in 2014,³⁷ was the clearly perceived need to shift positions in today’s changed world: from defining a specific space for the region to placing it in a global perspective.

Even in the time since the conference, the landscape of Europe has drastically changed, with the massive influx of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants and many newly fortified borders and fences, with extreme right-wing parties winning seats in the elected parliaments of Poland and Slovakia, and with frequent terrorist attacks, which are being used to justify moves toward centralization, authoritarianism, and the expanding control of state power all over Europe. Along with the political and social changes, the rhetoric of distinct features in the region’s art has also changed its meaning for the wider community. One can no longer argue for the specificities of art and culture of the East-Central European region as a consequence of the different trajectory of its history, since this argument, even if only on its surface, resembles and partly overlaps with the rhetoric of the nationalist discourses and so could be mistakenly identi-

fied with them. The momentum for arguing for a regionalism with its specificities is simply gone. This approach is being squeezed out of scholarly debate, losing priority, in the recent turmoil of history, which pushes this commitment aside and renders it, yet again, ill-timed and irrelevant. East-Central European art history again finds itself at a crossroads with regard to its position, trapped between the forces of the global and local perspectives.

³⁷ Held at Galeria Labirynt in Lublin, Poland, October 24–27, 2014; see <http://labirynt.com/en/east-european-art-seen-from-global-perspective-past-and-present/> (accessed April 21, 2016).

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