

INTERVIEWS

Central and East European Art and Culture, 1945-Present

BY SUSAN SNODGRASS · PUBLISHED 10/15/2001

“The following roundtable concluded a panel devoted to contemporary and art historical perspectives on central and East European art and culture from 1945 to the present at this year’s College Art Association Conference in Chicago. The panel was convened by Susan Snodgrass who has also written the introduction to the discussion. Over the next few months, ARTMargins will publish, in loose succession, the papers delivered by the panel’s participants.”

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Participating Panelists

Roann Barris (R. B.) Since receiving her Ph.D. in art history, Roann Barris has been teaching courses in modern and contemporary western and non-western art history, and is currently teaching at Casper College in Wyoming. She has continued to do research and has published several articles on the reception of Russian constructivism, work which was supported by grants from IREX, the Social Science Research Council, and a Kress fellowship. Her more recent work, on the Romanian architectural competition, “the Bucharest 2000,” also received support from an IREX grant. A longer version of her CAA presentation on this topic has been published in the May 2001 issue of the *Journal of Architectural Education*.

Attila Horányi (A. H.) is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Aesthetics at Eötvös Lóránd University in Budapest, and a lecturer in the Department of the History of Philosophy at the University of Pecs, also in Hungary.

Matthew Jesse Jackson (M. J. J.) is a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Berkeley, in the Department of the History of Art. He is also a doctoral candidate in Russian Literature at Columbia University, New York. He is currently completing his dissertation, entitled *Answers of the Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Soviet Conceptualism, and the End of An Avant-Garde*.

Martina Pachmanová (M. P.) is an art historian, independent curator, and writer. She is Assistant Professor at the Academy of Arts, Architecture, and Design in Prague, Czech Republic. Her essays and articles on modern and contemporary art, many of them dealing with issues of gender, sexual politics, and feminism, have been published in periodicals and exhibition catalogues in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Croatia, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Piotr Piotrowski (P. P.) is Professor and Chair of the Department of Art History at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland, and currently is a Visiting Professor at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. He is also co-editor of the annual journal *Artium Quaestiones*; Vice-President of AICA-Poland; and former Senior Curator of contemporary art at the National Museum, Poznan, where he served from 1992 to 1997.

Katalin Timar (K. T.) is an art historian, curator, and critic based in Budapest, Hungary. She is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Art History at ELTE University of Arts and Sciences, Budapest, where she is also a founding member of OTKA Research Group in the University’s Department of Aesthetics.

Introduction

The production and interpretation of East-Central European art during the last 50 or so years have been greatly influenced by the region’s political events, in particular the rise and fall of Communist rule. Although political oppression of culture has dominated much of the region’s history since the Second World War, artistic expression survived outside the official structures. Likewise, the sanctions imposed by Socialist doctrine varied from country to country, accounting for the eclectic nature of both official and unofficial art from the former Eastern Bloc.

The Wall’s destruction and, more importantly, the image of the Wall’s destruction imprinted upon our collective memory, ruptured, in theory, the geopolitical divide between East and West, exposing the failure of the Communist project, whose corpus is now disembodied. However, physical borders are easier to destroy than mental ones, as the painful reconstruction of Russia, East-Central Europe and the Balkans has shown. Still in place are unfulfilled fantasies on both sides of the former Wall — some in the East are disillusioned with the West, while some in the West are disappointed that the East has not been reborn in its own likeness.

The dramatic political changes occurring throughout East-Central Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall have created a free but transitional state of uncertainty, spawning an essential questioning of cultural identity. This process of transformation and self-definition includes critical assessment of both the Communist and pre-Communist past, reflective analysis of the post-Communist present, and formulation of strategies anticipating the future. These endeavors are destabilizing, yet each attempts to situate the region within larger historic, geographic and cultural narratives, the task of our panel here today.

In an attempt to understand the shifting realities of this new paradigm, artists, critics and cultural institutions are redefining art’s role in a civil society, expanding its audiences and creating a critical context that allows for broader fields of interpretation. One strategy has been to reclaim the heritage of East-Central European art history, correlating the art of the present with the art of the past, in particular those movements that sought universal ideas while asserting the sensibilities of place.

Thus, East-Central Europe stands at an important artistic and geographical crossroads, where the intersection of local, regional, and international perspectives allows for the free exchange of ideas. The deep divisions that once defined art as either official or unofficial are gone, but great voids in the art historical discourse remain. Being charted is a new critical dialogue, contributions to which are shared this panel.⁽¹⁾

Roundtable Discussion

S.S.: It seems as if certain Western strategies and terminologies, whether Informel, Pop Art, or feminism, cannot be wholly applied to the East-Central European context. In this forum, those scholars from the region framed the problem in terms of colonialization. Those scholars working in the United States used Western deconstructive strategies as well as bodily metaphors, such as wounds and parasitism, to reveal the political apparatus at work in Socialist bureaucracies. In addition to recognizing cultural difference and the need for unconditional dialogue, what strategies and methodologies are being used in current curatorial and pedagogical practice to properly contextualize East-Central European art and art history? Are these strategies still divided along the old East-West lines?

P.P.: The question of what strategies should be used in the interpretation of East-Central European art is central. However, I’m not sure if adopting a post-colonial viewpoint is the right interpretive strategy. Post-colonial discourses deal mostly with something in the center and something outside the center, the real process of colonialization, the “real” Other. Ironically, East-Central European artists, Hungarian artists dealing with Pop Art, for example, and Polish artists working with Informel, wanted to be colonized. For them, colonialization was a kind of prestige and a resistance against Socialist political oppression. More importantly, East-Central Europeans are used to seeing themselves in a unique position in relation to European culture. What we need in order to discuss this problem is not the notion of the Other, but a related concept, that of the “close” Other, that is to say, the Other that is not the “real” Other, but an Other that we associate, for example, with living in our neighborhood. Again, I am not convinced that a post-colonial strategy is useful for our discussion. The problem lies in the proper contextualization.

K.T.: I think you are right. As you say, we East-Central Europeans are not the “real” Other, but a sort of in-between, close neighbor, and somehow we are lost in this in-between position. While I generally agree, sometimes these positions fluctuate; sometimes East-Central European art is in the position of the “real” Other, and sometimes it’s in this position of in-between. When Attila Horanyi and I started our research group in Budapest, the aim was to introduce Hungarians to American and Anglo-Saxon art theory of the past 25 years, an effort that was, in part, a critical reflection of our own activity, while trying to find a position for ourselves.

M.P.: It really does seem that we are in an in-between position, not the “real” Other and, yet, somehow Other. It is interesting to observe in the United States how visible various cultures of color are in the cultural discourse and how invisible East-Central European art has remained in this context, culturally and politically. It seems that we are not exotic enough to really be part of this new post-colonial desire for the Other because we are white, and because we are historically part of Western culture. Also, when we speak about “center versus periphery,” it is important to note that we are talking about East-Central European art from rather privileged positions — we are all academics and we are, essentially, talking about white East-Central European artists. It seems to me that the real question here is: Where is the Other within our own culture? In the Czech Republic, for example, we have a large gypsy or Roma population. Of course the Roma create art, but their art is cast aside and interpreted as artifacts or folk art or belonging to “low” culture. Thus, the invisibility we experience ourselves is something we need to discuss and reflect upon further, and is closer to home than we think.

R.B.: I want to say something from the “other” side in this case, about the language I used. The language of wounding did not originate with me. It was the language used by Ion Iliescu, by the competition brief and program, and subsequently by most of the competition entrants, and continues to be the language used today.

P.P.: Returning to what Martina said earlier. The problem in comparing, let’s say, South American culture in the United States to East-Central European culture is determining a common level of identification, for East-Central European culture is something like a wound. What is this wound? It is the past. The Communist past. People living in South America want, more or less, to consciously forget the past. This is not a real or good basis for making a common strategy. The mythology of being in-between has historically been strong in certain countries such as Hungary and Poland, who have traditionally occupied a place between East and West. This was less the case in other countries, such as the Czech Republic. So that the idea of being in-between is crucial in creating a strategy for these countries to identify themselves as a region in the face of Europe.

AUDIENCE: It is important to clarify the relationship between what is going on in the contemporary art world in East-Central Europe and the political, economic, and social situations in these countries, as they enter a market economy. These artists want to go abroad, they want to become part of the discourse that is going on in France, Germany and America. The idea of being peripheral and marginalized within the context of physical borders is totally unattractive. And, indeed, this idea of becoming colonized, as Piotr Piotrowski mentioned earlier, is exactly what they want. They do not want to be identified as Rumanian artists or as good Polish artists. They want to be recognized as contemporary artists on a universal level.

P.P.: This is a crucial question. The curator of the exhibition *After The Wall*, Bojana Pejic, quotes a Lithuanian artist in the exhibition catalogue: “I don’t want to be an Eastern European artist anymore, I just want to be an artist.” Artists working in East-Central Europe know that they are living in an historical in-between. They have to negotiate between the Communist past and the new consumer culture. Some artists, like Zbigniew Libera from Poland, deal deeply with these two points of reference. It is one thing to analyze how artists from East-Central Europe want to be “universal” artists, but one also needs to consider how this desire is contextualized.

M.P.: The main question seems to be, who really speaks for us? In Steven Mansbach’s recent book on East-Central European modernism, the first major publication to deal with this subject, we have somebody else speaking for us, which I find quite problematic. Not that I don’t trust a foreign person voice. In this particular case, though, I find Mansbach’s book, one, repeats certain modernist clichés — which, by the way, a lot of East-Central European artists are reiterating themselves — and, two, doesn’t present any points of view from the region. Also, I doubt if it would be possible for an East-Central European art historian to propose such a project to a publisher in the United States or Britain. Obviously there are a lot of political and economic interests at stake. Returning to the issue of contemporary art, I do not see a major difference between contemporary art being made in Britain and that being produced in the Czech Republic or Hungary, especially work by young artists who want to be part of the global scene. But as soon as these artists bring their work to a New York gallery, they signify the Other.

M.J.J.: It really comes down to which structures East-Central European artists are trying to become incorporated into. What are we talking about when we use these universal categories, when we say the “contemporary art world,” the “contemporary art market.”? What is all of that a part of? Where does that lead? If the goal is to become a part of something, well, that’s good. But what is East-Central Europe becoming in this process? I think we have to look at different models of globalization, such as those proposed by Antonio Negri and Saskia Sassen. We need to think about the global service economy, and if East-Central Europe might become, if all goes well, a part of that service economy. Is incorporation really good? Should it be impeded as some sort of opposition to this process, which I am calling spectacle, but you can call it globalization?

AUDIENCE: The distinction between East and West seems to me to be largely erroneous. How do some of you on the panel feel about being grouped together as East-Central Europeans? Do you experience any kind of solidarity? As far as our earlier discussion as to whether Pop Art is a purely Western phenomenon, I wonder whether it is the term “art” itself, or the notion of art as an autonomous sphere, that is really at issue when we speak about East-Central European culture, which is, after all, historically Western?

P.P.: I think these issues are more complicated. Consider the fact that once countries like the Czech Republic join the European Union, the border between Europe and the “close” Other Europe will run within what used to be Czechoslovakia. The same will be true for Slovenia and Croatia, Croatia, Poland and Serbia. From that point of view, what was once perceived as a, more or less, coherent region will disappear. Given the problematic nature of the 19th-century notion of Central Europe, or Mitteleuropa, we have to ask what the nature of this integration will be. We can talk about another dimension, however, and that is the margin, the margin that is connected to the center, and maybe this is one possibility for creating a common identification.

S.S.: I would like to return to this notion of in-between, as it touches upon a lot of the issues that we have been discussing. Is there any way that this position of ambiguity could actually be seen as one of power, or is it always a position of powerlessness?

K.T.: I remember a comment made by Mieke Bal at the Getty Summer Institute at the University of Rochester: “You can’t become international without problematizing your own culture.” It is important to think about this statement in the context of the Getty Institute, where two thirds of the participants came from East-Central Europe.

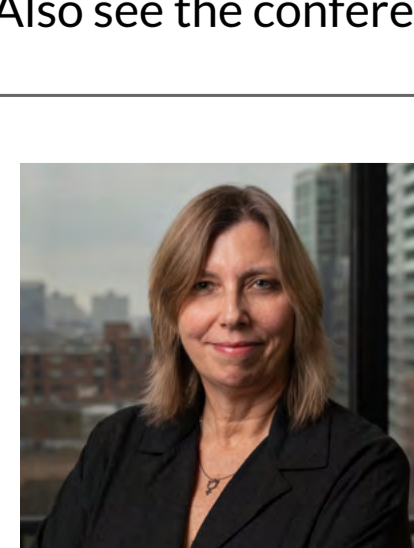
P.P.: I think you are right. There is an opportunity to see something powerful. But the question would be, where is it? Andrzej Turowski, a Polish scholar who lives in France, once stated that the margin is a powerful position from which to create a critical discourse with the center. In other words, some discourses and art produced in the margins could be used to see the center, i.e., European culture, critically.

I would like to shift our discussion to feminism in East-Central Europe. In the introduction to her book *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts*, Griselda Pollock poses an interesting polemic about the academic appropriation of feminism, which she strongly opposes, claiming that feminism is a political approach to reality. But what I see in feminist production in the United States and Western Europe is not a particularly political approach because there is no real strong resistance to it. The reason for the powerful reception of feminism in countries such the Czech Republic and Poland is because the current economic situation for women is really painful. If we contextualize these strategies and discourses, we can see how important they are in the present social and political situation, where women are repressed by this post-Communist system, which continues, by the way, the repression experienced under Communism. This is, perhaps, an answer to your question. For Pollock, feminism has become an academic strategy, a tool to interpret culture. In East-Central Europe, this is not the case. There, feminism is a really powerful social and political movement.

M.J.J.: I wanted to say something about the idea of alterity. Is alterity a strategy used in the process of globalization? How does this process of incorporation play out as a practical, real entity? What is its social application? Is this merely a discussion among art professionals?

S.S.: You present a series of very important questions, something for us to think about and, perhaps, a good way to end this discussion. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who participated in this panel.

Also see the conference “[East-European Art and Architecture in the 20th century](#)”.



Susan Snodgrass

Susan Snodgrass is a Chicago-based critic and editor of *ARTMargins Online*. Much of her writing is devoted to alternative models of critical practice and artmaking, whether exploring new genres of public art or contemporary art in former Eastern Europe. She is a 2018 recipient of a Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for her blog, *In/Site: Reflections on the Art of Place*, which explores art, architecture and urbanism, and a finalist for the 2019 Dorthea and Leo Rabkin Foundation Arts Journalist Award. She has written for both print and online publications for over 30 years, most notably for *Art in America* for which she was a Corresponding Editor, as well as *Textile: Cloth and Culture* and *THE SEEN*. Her book *Inside the Matrix: The Radical Designs of Ken Isaacs* was published by Half Letter Press in 2019.

FOOTNOTES

- Some of these ideas have been expressed in two previous articles written by myself, “Toward a New Bohemia,” *Art in America*, (April 2000) pp. 86-94, and “Post-Communist Expressions,” *Art in America* (June 2000), pp. 46-51. [\[back\]](#)