Unearthing the legacies of art historiography during the Post-War decades

Review of:

A Socialist Realist History? Writing Art History in the Post-War Decades edited by Krista Kodres, Kristina Jõekalda, Michaela Marek, Wien, Köln, Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2019, 279 pp., 35 b/w illustrations, ISBN 978-3-412-51161-6 (=Robert Born, Michaela Marek, Ada Raev: Das östliche Europa: Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, vol. 9)

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The art historiography of Central and Eastern Europe under socialism laid the foundations for a historiographical tradition that has influenced art historical practices in the area up to the present day. Yet this long-neglected research topic has only recently begun to attract the scholarly attention it deserves. Confirming the relevance of this fact, critical reflection on the present state of the discipline runs as a common thread through most of the thirteen contributions in the conference volume *A Socialist Realist History? Writing Art History in the Post-War Decades* edited by Krista Kodres, Kristina Jõekalda, and the late Michaela Marek.[1]

Focused on the 1950s and 1960s, the volume covers the formative years of Socialist art history, when the canon of its epistemic interests, subjects of study, and methodology were contrived. During the decades to follow, scholars of socialist Central and Eastern Europe discussed and partially corrected the canon, but never truly challenged it in its core up until the dissolution of state socialism.

The main constraint to the development of art historiography under socialism was, of course, its required theoretical grounding in Marxism-Leninism. In studying how art historians in socialist Central and Eastern Europe translated this theoretical grounding into their scholarly practice, the volume makes an important contribution to the growing research on art historiography in that region. This research has mainly consisted of case studies on local art history writing in the 19th and early 20th centuries,[2] or analyses of specific topics[3], without seeking to provide

[1] The conference *Art History and Socialism(s) after World War II Art History and Socialism(s) after World War II: The 1940s until the 1960s* was hosted by the Institute of Art History and Visual Culture, Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn, and took place 27–29 October 2016.

[2] The first major contribution to the then evolving field of study was: Robert Born/Alena Janátková/ Adam Labuda, eds, *Die Kunsthistoriographien in Ostmitteleuropa und der nationale Diskurs*, Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 2004. Since then a number of international conferences has resulted in publications, among others: Jerzy Malinowski, *History of Art History in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe*, 2 vols, Torún: Society of Modern Art & Tako Publishing House, 2012; and Mathew Rampley et. al., eds, *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe. Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012.

[3] Michaela Marek and Eva Pluhařová-Grigienė, eds of the special section ´Baroque for a wide public´, *Journal of Art Historiography*, 15, December 2016, https://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/15-dec16; Michaela Marek and Eva Pluhařová-

a basis for a comprehensive study of the socialist period in a systematical and chronological fashion. The present book makes a significant contribution towards this, all the more so since it has been published in English.

In their introduction, Krista Kodres and Kristina Jõekalda summarize some of the basic assumptions of Socialist art history, which Soviet ideologues formulated the decade after the 1939-45 war. In so doing, they provide the reader with a backdrop against which to compare the various approaches represented in the volume's case studies of different countries. According to Kodres and Jõekalda, an indispensable precondition for art historical practice was Marxism-Leninism's claim that social formations are always rooted in class character, and are shaped from progressive and reactionary forces. As an expression of class character, therefore, art also had to be separated into 'progressive' and 'reactionary' art forms. Progressive historical art was marked by the realism of its form, its nationalist or folksy character, and its proto-socialist content. Art historians of the time projected these virtues mainly onto Classical antiquity, Renaissance, and Neo-Classicism. On the other end of the spectrum, reactionary art was characterized by its alignment with the nebulous categories of formalism, cosmopolitanism, anti-humanism, or its religious nature. Making this distinction was the main task of Socialist art historians. But why was it necessary to make this distinction in the first place? Answering this question is essential to our understanding of art history's purpose within socialist society, which sought—above all else—to create a reservoir of 'progressive' historic forms for contemporary Socialist Realist artistic production.

It was this ultimate goal of art history that determined the discipline's various discourses under socialism, which consequently centered around the realist mode of depiction. Realism in this sense not only referred to style, but also to the demand that art should address social reality. It goes without saying that this reality was to be seen through an ideologically blended lens. It was for this reason that the editors of *A Socialist Reality* chose to use the neologism 'Socialist realist art history' in the book's title, as a reference to the specific directedness of Socialist art histories as a whole. Or as Katja Bernhardt, writing in the same volume, noted with reference to the circumstances in the GDR, it was precisely this 'pronounced contemporary relevance' of furthering the development of Socialist Realist art while also guiding the ideological right's understanding of artistic heritage for the benefit of society that distinguished Socialist art historiography from its bourgeois predecessors (p. 58). And, one may add, this feature also distinguished it from its Western counterparts, which were at least nominally committed to the ideal of independent research.

The volume aims to figure out whether or not there are 'specific rules that applied within the discipline of Socialist art history, and to ask how these rules are reflected in the narratives of the history of art in the various countries of the Soviet bloc.' (Kodres and Jõekalda, p. 14) In going about this task, the volume's eleven case studies combine a range of different approaches. Ranging from close readings of

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Grigienė, eds, ´Prekäre Vergangenheit? Barockforschung im östlichen Mitteleuropa unter den Bedingungen des Sozialismus´, *RIHA Journal*, 0211, 31 May 2019, https://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2019/0211-0217-special-issue-historiography-in-cold-war-era.

programmatic texts and reference works to reconstructions of discourse trajectories in less prominent and permanent forums (academic journals, conference proceedings, exhibitions, etc.). Interestingly, as some contributions show, it was first and foremost the latter media that provided a space for more flexible historical interpretations. One of the book's merits is to have pointed out the potential of these largely untapped sources for further study. The authors also correlate the published writings of some of the period's leading art historians with their intellectual biographies. This range of approaches enables them to retrace the complexity and processuality of a Socialist art history that evolved at an uneven pace and with a varying dynamic in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, in accordance with the specific circumstances of each country.

This knowledge challenges the overly simplified, but nevertheless still widespread, top-down interpretations of the implementation of Marxism-Leninism as the mandatory basis of academic research and teaching from Moscow or the Soviet centre. Art historical research in the former Socialist People's Republics was centrally organized in accordance with the Soviet model, and set the course for the division of functional responsibilities. In this way, it provided the institutional framework for the identification of epistemological interests and the methodological development of research, publication options, and—last but not least—career paths. Yet direct influence from Moscow institutions, the volume suggests, was more of an exception than the rule and far less systematic than imagined; in fact, it took place rather horizontally (Karolina Łabowicz-Dymanu, p.85),[4] at least until 1950. Together with the idea of an absolute opposition between East and West, or between official and unofficial cultural spheres within socialist societies, these assumptions are rooted in frames of perception that were forged during the Cold War era. The contributors stress the need to step out of such binary interpretive models that continue to shape perceptions of art historiography under socialism , although they have been the subject of scrutiny for quite some time now.[5]

Piotr Juszkiewicz illustrates this convincingly using the example of the academic oeuvre of Mieczysław Porębski (1921-2012), an eminent Polish art historian. Porębski's approach changed over the course of his career, promoting Socialist Realism during the 1950s, Modernism in the following decade, and finally, in the 1970s, applying a methodology that was inspired by French structuralism. Scholarship that seeks to explain Porębski's remarkable intellectual path as either opportunist or pragmatic in the face of ideological pressure, Juszkiewicz argues, tells us more about the bias among contemporary researchers of Central and Eastern Europe than it does about the evolution of ideas in this geographical area.
Were it possible to characterize the art historian Porębski as either loyal to the regime or oriented towards Western European culture, his actions and choices would be interpretable as acts of either collaboration or resistance. But this was not

[4] Łabowicz-Dymanu is referring to Piotr Piotrowski's episteme of horizontal art history challenging the Western-centric position of the canon applying it to the circumstances within the Soviet bloc with its centre Moscow. See Piotr Piotrowski, ´On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History´, *Umění / Art*, 5, 2008, 378-383.

[5] See Aleksandr Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until it Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

the case. Porębski drew on French structuralism, without perceiving it as standing in opposition to his Marxist belief in historical determinism.

The contributions show that, in all of the case study countries examined, art historians looked for different ways to adapt to the demands of Marxism-Leninism—ways that would allow for a more integrative or synthetic approach. Łabowicz-Dymanu looks at another Polish example, that of Juliusz Starzyński. Starzyński belonged to the older generation of art historians who held central positions in Socialist Poland, heading the country's key institutions—first and foremost the State Institute of Art (Państwo Instytut Sztuki)—and helping to manage Polish art historical knowledge production. Drawing on his Marxist beginnings of the interwar period, he sought to use historical materialism to incorporate the idea of a modern *paragone* between realist and avant-garde art, explaining why the former eventually won the competition.

In Czechoslovakia as well, scholars of the older generation—people like Antonín Matějček (1889-1950) or the renowned structuralist Jan Mukařovský (1891-1975)—embarked on the post-war project of building a better world through Socialism. Milena Bartlová interprets their willingness to adapt to Marxism-Leninism not least as a result of its compatibility with older thought traditions in the Czech humanities that had strong socialist roots. However, explicit pre-war Marxist approaches to art critique and theory, as addressed most notably by Karel Teige (1900-1951), were not taken up by Czech Socialist art historiography. Rather, art historians continued to follow the established model of the Vienna School, transformed into a nation-based concept. A Marxist-Leninist re-evaluation of art history, elaborated during the early 1950s foremost by young and ambitious Jaromír Neumann (1924-2001), did not fundamentally change this; it simply combined it with a new periodisation conceived by historians, one that focused on national emancipation periods. Bartlová detects an apologetic stance in current Czech art historiography, noting the pervasive assumption that texts published in the Stalinist period have an 'ideological shell' that can be separated from their scientific content (p. 51), and thus continue to be used. Bartlová takes this uncritical practice as evidence of how profoundly Marxist-Leninist ideas have been adapted within the discipline.

Like Bartlová, Katja Bernhardt dismisses a top-down model of the development of Socialist art historiography, rather interpreting the process as a 'push and pull between political authorities' ideological demands and the interests of art historians themselves.' (p. 58) While previous research has focused on institutional restructuring as a medium of the enforcement of Marxist-Leninist art history in postwar Eastern Germany, Bernhardt instead is interested in discussing the core ideas of this still relatively free period. Using the example of the specialist periodical *Zeitschrift für Kunst* (Journal for Art)—for which Bernhardt's study offers the first in-depth examination on this subject—she retraces scholarly debates over how *Kunstwissenschaft* or academic art history should best develop as they unfolded between 1947 (when the journal was first published) until 1950 (when the discourse began to be more rigidly focused on its Socialist ideological component and the periodical was eventually closed down).

Some scholars took the opportunity offered by Marxism-Leninism to accommodate formerly contradictory narratives, as Juliana Maxim shows in her

study of the Romanian architectural historian Gregore Ionescu (1904-1992). Author of the two-volume work of reference *History of Architecture in Romania*, published in 1963-1965, and reprinted in 1982, Ionescu used Marxism-Leninism as an integrative tool to bridge the gaps between the categories of 'high' and 'low' culture, and between the multi-ethnic and the national. This provided a framework for the integration of vernacular buildings that were formerly regarded as minor, and hence not worthy subjects of architectural historiography—for example farm houses—into the history of architecture. Folk architecture now gained greater recognition thanks the interpretation of it as an expression 'from amongst the people' (p. 214). In contributing to this shift in perception, Ionescu historicized folk architecture and eventually even interpreted it as having inspired local Church architecture—regarded as a unique feature of Romanian national school—thereby coming up with an interpretation with the 'correct' ideological stance. In contrast to longstanding approaches, Ionescu classified architectural types not by region, but by building types, thereby opening the way for a more integrative view that allowed for contributions from Turks, Tatars, old believers etc., all of whom had previously been excluded from the national canon.

In a second text on Romanian architectural historiography, Carmen Popescu addresses two core issues relevant to all of the art and architectural history writing coming out of socialist Central and Eastern Europe, and that affected the development of the discipline: namely, the question of ideological charge and the division of functional responsibilities within academia. Romanian Socialist architectural history writing tended to stay at the surface, writing surveys but neglecting documentation, focusing on narrativity at the expense of sound methodology and in-depth analysis based on archival material. This, Popescu claims, weakened the functioning of the whole academic field as expressed in a lack of expertise, of methods of study, and biased interpretation. Afraid of addressing potentially ideologically precarious subjects, the author explains, Romanian scholars of the time hesitated to engage in thorough historiographical research. This was especially true in scholarship that addressed modern and contemporary architecture. Popescu also demonstrates that the academic segmentation of art and architectural history resulted in divided responsibilities, which further hindered the development of professional skills in Romania. Art history institutes did not regard modern and contemporary art and architecture as appropriate subjects of study and architectural history played only a minor role in the curricula of the architectural faculty and later Institute of Architecture.

This effect of division of responsibilities can be also observed with other fields of study, like contemporary art or history of photography, which underlie art historical research today. While in the United States and Western Europe the history of photography was slowly integrated into the art historical canon from the 1970s onwards, in Socialist art history it has never been regarded as a subject of serious study. Thus, most photographic literature was published not in academic forums but in popular professional journals that targeted wider audiences. This dispersion makes it all the more difficult for today's scholars to reconstruct theoretical

discourses on the history of photography, since the texts are scattered across a wide range of newspapers, journals, and catalogues.[6]

Popescu concludes that, as in many other countries of the former Eastern bloc, after 1989 Socialist art history writing in Romania was more or less discarded as being ideologically charged. Formerly neglected topics—the destruction of architectural heritage under Communism, for example, or the Modernism of the interwar period—now occupied center stage. Yet as the findings of Popescu and other authors of the volume suggest, despite its dethroned status aspects of Socialist art history have prevailed in the form of methodological research tools and resources, lack of theorization, and the uncritical usage of dated works of reference.

Yet legacies from these early days in the development of a Socialist art history canon also take the form of value judgements, and the latter are particularly resilient when combined with earlier established paradigms like that of national culture. In her substantial study, Kädi Talvoja shows how the oeuvre of the eminent Kristjan Raud (1865-1943) was interpreted along those lines during the 1960s. It was indeed his Soviet era appreciation, she argues, that fostered Raud's iconic status in Estonian national art. After the Stalinist rejection of the allegedly bourgeois and formalist style of Raud's illustrations of the national epic Kalevipoeg, it gained a new appreciation during the 1960s as being representative of Estonian cultural features. Raud's style had to offer not only national form but also socialist content, in that it illustrated an epic that was based on folk tales featuring a proto-socialist hero who was hard-working, a fighter, a builder, etc. This (re)nationalisation of Raud's oeuvre was favoured by circumstances: in ca. 1960, Soviet cultural policy shifted towards a new appraisal of long-standing national cultural traditions as a source pf contemporary Soviet art, which itself was now understood to result from dialectical process between various different Soviet national cultures, and additionally because there was an interest in presenting the Soviet Union to the outside world as a cultured country. Talvoja points out the twofold workings of this Sovietised national paradigm, which successfully supported national identity building but ultimately sought to use this folklorised national identity as a means of integrating it into a common multi-national Soviet identity under Russian leadership. Thus, Talvoja challenges the convenient narrative of 'the national as a subversive strategy against forced socialist content' that has long dominated the Estonian art historiographical discourse.

In between the case studies, Ivan Gerát's contribution on Marxist iconology in Czechoslovakia stands out because he frames his examination of the Socialist version of this traditional methodology with more general reflections on the difficult ethical questions for which intellectuals facing the menaces of Stalinism urgently needed answers, including threats to their careers and lives. This, he reminds the reader, also obliges researchers today to adopt a critical stance when using the academic output produced under totalitarian circumstances. That this methodology, which is so closely linked to the study of Christian art, could be adapted to anti-

[6] Perceiving this shortcoming Tomáš Pospěch in 2010 edited a first anthology of theoretical texts on Czech(oslovak) photography from 1938 until the year 2000: Tomáš Pospěch, ed., *Česká fotografie: 1938–2000 v recenzích, textech, dokumentech*, Hranice: Nakl. Dost, 2010.

clerical socialist ideology in the first place had to do with its prominent promoter Jaromír Neumann. In the early 1950s, Neumann was a young and fervent advocate of the development of a new Socialist art history, and later became one of the eminent figures of the discipline holding central professional positions. As Gerát demonstrates in connection with its concrete application within Renaissance and Medieval art scholarship, iconology was understood as the search for hidden meaning, a meaning that underlay its more obvious Christian content. Interpreted in this light, illustrations from the Passional of Abbess Kunigunde (Passionale abbatissae Cunegundis, commissioned in 1312) could be read as bearing astrological meaning and thus having historic significance for the natural sciences, or Albrecht Dürer's Apocalypse woodcut series (1498) could be seen as containing proto-revolutionary visions later reflected in Communist ideas.

Some of the authors, like Nataliya Zlydneva, look back at their own intellectual training. Zlydneva's study frames her experiences with the older generation of art historians during the course of her art historical education in the 1960s. Her teachers had studied in the 1920s and were aligned to pre-war schools of thought embedded in Marxist sociological approaches that, from the 1960s onwards, drove them to make forays into other, more theoretically advanced disciplines such as Soviet linguistics. However, these endeavours remained alternative paths, and mainstream art historiography—whether from institutional inertia or as a defence of their own academic niche as a space relatively unnoticed by ideological attention—followed the more traditional ways of positivist survey and formal analysis. Zlydneva calls for a higher awareness among researchers of the differences that existed within the different schools and institutions, not only in Soviet Russia, but in all other Soviet republics, with their own intellectual traditions and specific contexts.

Another account that draws on personal encounters is that of Marina Dmitrieva, whose study pays homage to the Russian art historian and dissident Igor Golomstock (1929-2017). During the Thaw period, Golomstock co-authored together with Andrei Sinyavsky (1925-1997) the book *Picasso* (Moscow: Znanie, 1960), which immediately acquired cult status because of its implicit revision of the principles of Socialist Realism with the aim of opening it up towards modernist form. In an ensuing book project, Golomstock undertook a critical comparison of the art in totalitarian states during the interwar period, which was ultimately published only in 1990 in the United Kingdom, the country of his exile.[7] Dmitrieva juxtaposes Golomstock's book with anti-modernist texts by Mikhail Lifshitz (1905-1983), a prominent creator of Marxist aesthetics. As she points out, despite their adversarial views on art and politics there are—astonishingly—striking similarities in their analysis and critique of forms and media of Modernism, which were adopted by the totalitarian propaganda of the time. The perspectives are exemplary of the problematic relationship between Modernism and Socialist Realism, on the one hand, and the socio-political role of art, on the other, that Socialist art historians

[7] Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and People's republic of China*, transl. By Robert Chanlder, London: IconEditions, 1990.

from different ends of the ideological spectrum were trying to redefine after the end of Stalinism.

The contributions reveal that the discourse on Socialist art history was never static, and gained more flexibility during the Thaw. Yet, its modernization evolved slowly and in diverse ways in the different academic environments. Given that this is a conference volume one can hardly criticize the fact that it covers many, but not all, of the former Eastern bloc countries. Its contributions on Soviet Russia are of definite merit, as this perspective is often missing in cooperative research on Central and Eastern Europe. The authors of the volume have clearly indicated the need for additional research on the relationship between the Russian centre of the Soviet Union and other member states and the single Socialist states; equally underresearched are Socialist art histories' entanglements with academia beyond the socialist world. In this context, an unbiased review of the reception of Marxism and Marxism-Leninism for art historical research in socialist Europe, especially in the early years, and again during the Thaw, promises to substantially widen our knowledge of the intellectual history of the twentieth century.

Overall, this volume is a highly valuable contribution to the study of art historiography in socialist Europe in that it deepens the understanding of the complexity and processuality of the discipline's development and demonstrates the benefits and need for further in-depth studies. Now is an optimal time to build on the results presented here and those of similar recent projects in a comprehensive study, one that draws wider conclusions for the whole field and clearly defines units and levels of comparison for the different narratives of art history presented by former Soviet bloc countries. One would also wish for a critically edited source book in which key programmatic texts from all of the countries involved are presented in their original languages, together with an English translation.[8] Apart from this historiographic research interest, the contributions collected in this volume clearly and convincingly illustrate the need for a thorough revision of the field, one that recognizes the socialist legacy and its continued deep influence on today's art historical research— particularly regarding less obvious path dependencies, such as methodological approaches.[9]

[8] Complementing *Primary Documents. A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* edited by Laura Hoptman and Tomas Pospiszyl in 2002 (Cambridge: The MIT Press).

[9] A critical view on current art historiographic practices in the area was the seminar series *Unfolding Narratives: Art Histories in East-Central Europe after 1989* initiated by Piotr Piotrowski and organised by the Research and Academic Programme of the Clark Art Institute in collaboration with regional partners: http://www.clarkart.edu/rap/about (accessed 17 September, 2020). However, these meetings focused on possible directions of future art history writing, not so much on regional disciplinary legacies. On this topic see also: Edit András, ´What Does East-Central European Art History Want? Reflections on the Art History Discourse in the Region since 1989 ´, Christiane Erharter, Rawley Grau, and Urśka Jurman, eds, *EXTENDING the dialogue / essays by Igor Zabel Award laureates, grant recipients, and jury members, 2008-2014*, Ljubljana: Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory; Berlin: Archive Books; Vienna: Erste Foundation, 2016.

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