

Viktória Popovics:**Critical theory in art historical discourse**

In conversation with Maja and Reuben Fowkes

The claim of the Critical Theories research group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Art History [1] is to integrate critical theories in art historical discourse. The 3/2013 volume of the *Ars Hungarica* published by the group attempts to reposition the discipline and to ground a Hungarian critical discourse.

Your practice is characterized by translocality, you travel across Europe from conferences to workshops, and you organize exhibitions in several institutions and galleries in various countries. Why did you decide to create a basis in Hungary?

MF: I'm Croatian and Reuben is British and it happened that we met in the nineties in Budapest. That was one of the reasons why we also stayed here. I graduated in 1999 from Zagreb University, department of art history. At that time there were two important exhibitions in the Ludwig Museum Budapest - *After the Wall* [2] and *Aspects-Positions* [3], which I happened to see and also wrote reviews about. In a way it kind of provided an impulse for me to make the decision to stay in the region and research more about East European art.

RF: Looking back at that precise period around the end of the nineties - by that time I had completed an MA in East European Studies at the University of London. The subject of my dissertation was public monuments in Hungary after the Second World War. Later my interest widened and for my PhD research I took a comparative approach, focusing on monumental sculpture in post-war Eastern Europe. I compared Hungary, Bulgaria and East-Germany, looking at socialist realism and changes around public sculpture in the 1950s and up to the 1960s.

MF: We started to work together as well, and we tried to catch up also with Hungarian contemporary art, started to curate exhibitions, so professionally we were interested in staying in Budapest. In the current times we live in, you don't have to cut ties - from here it is possible to travel more often to Croatia, studying and working in UK, and you can still be based in Hungary. When we were thinking about our website we decided to call it *Translocal*. [4] *Translocality* describes the position we are in - it provides a critical standpoint, you compare the situation from different localities, you see things clearer and better, and you also have distance for observation.

RF: *Translocality* can be understood as simultaneous situatedness across different locales, being situated in different places at the same time, not just restricted to one location. *Translocality* in Eastern Europe has tended to be seen in terms of multiple ethnicities, as lots of different traditional nationalities inhabit the region. What we also see is the situation at the end of the Cold War, the counter flow of non-native artists, curators, art historians also coming from all directions to the capitals of Eastern Europe, creating a much more cosmopolitan and transnational situation. They have the possibility to articulate and re-imagine how a post-national landscape would look.

Beside your curatorial practice, doing research into and writing academic essays on East European and Hungarian art is a significant part of your work. Doing this, the neo-avant-garde is often a point of reference even if you deal with recent contemporary art practices. From an international perspective, what is the main challenge for you in this activity?

MF: My interest in neo-avant-garde is connected to my PhD research, which was about Central European neo-avant-garde and its relationship to ecology. I did comparative research into how the neo-avant-garde artists in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia envisioned an approach to planetary politics around

1968, which I am now developing into a book. [5] On the one hand we are very much interested in art historical work, but at the same time we keep the position of curators of contemporary art. This is a quite productive or complementary position to be in, because one informs the other. I think if you are just a curator and you ignore art history, you lose out a lot. Many curators claim to be just curators...

RF: And on the other hand art historians also have a tendency to be closed in the library, only dealing with art movements of the past, and are not so connected with living art, with practice art.

MF: Art history provides points of connections with the past and many artists we are interested in, who are more politically or socially engaged, often recognize the connections to the neo-avant-garde, and even the aesthetics of the neo-avant-garde are often present in contemporary art. Just to come back to your question about the challenges and the problems of researching the neo-avant-garde, there have been many attempts to create new art histories of the region. For instance the SocialEast Seminars that Reuben organized were one of them...

RF: In 2006 I set up the SocialEast Forum on the Art and Visual Culture of Eastern Europe. [6] Over the years, we organized international seminars in Manchester, London, Budapest, Krakow and Zagreb. It was an attempt to respond to the challenges of writing and rewriting the history of East European art, including that of the neo-avant-garde. The aim was to see artistic practices not just in terms of local national canons, but also to place them in a comparative perspective. Nowadays contemporary art historians are trying to situate East European art history alongside that of other regions - not just by making comparisons with similar artistic practices in neighboring countries, but also by placing them within a wider international perspective. It is really about new kinds of transregional comparisons that people are increasingly looking out for. For instance, a forthcoming conference in Lublin this October entitled East European Art Seen from a Global Perspective: Past and Present, organized by Piotr Piotrowski, is a case in point.

It has become obvious today that several episodes of Hungarian art history are under-researched or lack a critical approach. What do you think is the reason and what are the consequences?

MF: Many other countries have similar situations with art history. If you do research on Croatian or Yugoslav art history of the time, it might seem that there is more research done, they worked on their canonical artists straightaway in the seventies, they produced catalogs, organized exhibitions, and it appears that very studious research was already done then. But at the same time, you have to consider that actually there are very many hotspots, unresolved questions, just as in any other local art history. Although the research was done, it was still done in an atmosphere that was marked by the political situation and the ideology that was present there...

RF: In the former Yugoslavia, there was a rejection of socialist realism and endorsement of modernism as a way of marking out a third way, a separate path to socialism, to split away from the socialist bloc...

MF: If you research art and ecology or socially engaged art, you discover that a lot of art critics there actually discredited such practices, since they didn't take it seriously enough and were not prepared to accept such innovative approaches, as much as they were prepared for instance to consider strategies of institutional critique, which was confined to the art world and did not tackle problems of society or politics. In some other countries in Central Europe, after the fall of communism art historians got together and made big exhibitions and research about that period. (In Slovakia there were such major projects about the 1960s 1970s and 1980s.) [7] I think that in Hungary this process is still happening, there is still a lot to do, but there are some current initiatives, for instance, the Long Sixties project. [8] Unresolved questions and mythical position exist in every art history of the region.

The gaps in research are also particularly pronounced in some areas. For example, when I was researching Hungarian performative practices, I realized that there were very few survey accounts that could be relied on as an art historical resource. [9] The lack of regular translation into English is another significant problem, in that it often excludes Hungarian art history from equal participation in regional and global art historical narratives. [10]

How could critical thinking and critical theory be applied and adapted in art historical discourse?

MF: Insight into current critical theory is an imperative for anyone working in the area of immaterial labor. Critical theory is also very important for art history and we consider it lot, but use it only when we think it is adequate and appropriate. While on the one hand there is a lack of critical theory in the education system and only slight changes towards examining theory in some university art departments, at foreign universities, where critical theory is so dominant, there has been a counter-movement. The argument is

that one should not fetishize theory, and give it primary attention, because you risk missing out the importance of the artworks that you analyze.

What is the raison d'etre of leftwing theory or any kind of left-wing inspired cultural practice in the post communist East?

RF: That is really about the particular situation that leftwing theory enjoys in Eastern Europe. To look at such theories today, you can only do so in awareness of what happened during the whole history of socialism - on the one hand the dominant socialist ideology, while on the other the failure of the experiment in socialism in Eastern Europe. At the same time, there is a quite hidden history of the left critique of socialism, which can also be found in the 1960s and 1970s, something that we looked at in our exhibition project *Loophole to Happiness*. [11] We were interested in the question, for example, of the possibility of criticizing the socialist system from the left, saying that what was called socialism wasn't really socialism. The starting point of the exhibition was the book by Miklos Haraszti "A Worker in a Worker's State." [12] He spent time working in a factory in Csepel for six months and in his account reveals that factory life was actually much more similar to Fordist capitalism than socialism; there were real conditions of exploitation, he also looked for moments and possibilities for socialist forms of solidarity and working together. So, there is a quite interesting minor tradition of a leftwing critique of socialism, which provides angles and perspectives for contemporary artists to analyze or criticize the current situation, and how things have been going since 1989 over the course of transition, while also providing approaches to thinking about the nature of globalization.

MF: In this project, it was very interesting to look at these niches of leftist criticism, which existed during "real existing socialism", such as the Korèula Summer School of Neo-marxist philosophers, examining the relationship of the new left in the West and similar thinkers in the East, called Marxist humanists. It was a very marginal and peculiar, completely invisible position, and we were interested in the connections with the neo-avant-garde. We think understanding this special position could be empowering, could be emancipatory for artists working in today's neoliberal conditions, addressing their problems from the perspective of the critique of a single system that existed then, and also exists again today in the form of neoliberal globalization.

One of your forthcoming essays is about sustainable research in contemporary art. [13] Could you reflect on this and on the notion of green curating in brief?

MF: For a long time critical theory was very much urban, focused on social-political issues, on human rights. Because of the environmental problems and global warming, critical theory now is also considering the impact of ecological crisis on the planet. Felix Guattari's essay "The Three Ecologies" [14] provides one entry point into understanding ecological critique, as it contains environmental, social and mental spheres of ecology. The environmental aspect can be seen as, for example, the ecological footprint of your work in terms of travel, energy use, and all the things you can possibly measure in terms of the environmental impact of your research. The second is the social level. It used to be that only scientific researchers had to answer questions about the ethics of their experiments. Nowadays this is also a regular question for the humanities, historical and social research, because you have to be aware of your ethical contexts: who is involved in the project, whether you are exploiting people, do you rely on and how do you treat interns? The third level is about mental ecology, where you ask questions about what this research contributes to and what are the benefits of it. If you consider your work to produce a value which can offset the ecological footprint that you created, than it has a justifiable outcome. These are the questions for art historians and curators as well: how many conferences in a year do you go to? Do you need to visit every biennial? The question of lifestyles becomes a part of the equation.

*In your essay of the *Ars Hungarica 2013/3* you examine Tamás Kaszás's artistic practice in relation to the neoliberal economics, global capitalism and ecological theories. You invoke the most cutting-edge theory such as Claire Bishop, Hardt and Negri, Guattari or Franco Berardi Bifo. How does the local practice relate to the global theory?*

MF: Tamas Kaszas's practice is very much relevant in a global and a local context as well. His work deals with ideas of counter-globalization, the crisis of neo-liberal society and he tries to find new alternatives and solutions for survival in his work. In Hungary his approach is quite unique, as there are not so many artists interested in ecology, but less so in terms of trends in contemporary art practice in the rest of the world. His work is not constrained by locality in terms of national art history, but deals rather with general questions and global issues of today's society. But at the same time, he works very much with the micro-environment, such as by relating to the legacy of the neo-avant-garde. He is very confident in using the heritage of art history, referring either to the classical avant-garde or the neo-avant-garde, the East or the

West, and is as happy to talk about Kassák as Szentjóby. We invited him to the discussion "Navigating Ecological Times" organized in the Whitechapel Gallery London last year [15], precisely because he has worked through these issues in his artistic practice and his lifestyle. The anti-capitalist theory and critique of globalization articulated for instance by Franco Berardi Bifo [16] is appropriate to analyze and to explicate his advanced and layered artistic approach.

What are the options on offer in today's socio-political situation for artistic and intellectual criticism, locally and globally alike?

RF: In general terms, artists have a choice whether to directly confront the situation, policies and ideologies they disagree with, which some artist do. The other alternative is to separate yourself and create a space, a niche, which is also a form of criticism. The title of one of the symposium we organized at the CEU was Exit or Activism? could be an answer to your question...

MF: But I think there are more options than either-or.....I believe that every historical time brings new possibilities and it might be a cliché, but crises are especially good for creativity. There are challenges for art history as well, as each new time requires a reinvention of the discipline. At the outset, back in the 1960s, ecology was seen as a subversive science, and its implications are still being worked through for art history and contemporary art. [17]

What advice would you give to the new generation of young curators in Hungary?

RF: It is only recently that curating started to be taught as a subject in Hungary and last summer we were quite impressed by the freshness of approach of the first graduating exhibitions of the students of the Academy of Fine Arts. In the current cultural-political situation it is very promising that curators and artists do find alternative ways, spaces and topics to reflect on. This kind of horizontal, democratic and grassroots approach, which is quite typical in international practice, shows that the new generation of Hungarian curators are in touch with what's happening globally in terms of the latest curatorial tendencies.

[1] Researchers: Edit András and Sándor Hornyik (project leaders), Tímea Junghaus, Mónika Perenyei, Erzsébet Tatai, Maja and Reuben Fowkes; Joined researchers: Katalin Timár, Hedvig Turai

[2] After the Wall. Art and Culture in the Postcommunist Europe, Ludwig Museum Budapest, June 15, 2000 - August 27, 2000. <http://www.ludwigmuseum.hu/site.php?inc=kiállítás&kiállításId=150&menuId=45>

[3] Aspects-Positions. Art in Central Europe 1949-1999, Ludwig Museum Budapest, March 24, 2000 - May 28, 2000. <http://www.ludwigmuseum.hu/site.php?inc=kiállítás&kiállításId=151&menuId=10>

[4] <http://www.translocal.org/>

[5] Maja Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-Avant-Garde and Ecology under Socialism* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015, forthcoming).

[6] <http://www.translocal.org/socialeast/index.html>

[7] See for example, *Slovak Visual Art from 1970 to 1985*, exhibition catalog (Bratislava: SNG, 2003) and *Postmodernism in Slovak Art 1985-1992*, edited Beata Jablonska (Bratislava: Slovak National Gallery, 2009).

[8] <http://longsixties.ludwigmuseum.hu/>

[9] Maja Fowkes: "Off the Record: Performative Practices in Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde and their Resonances in Contemporary Art", *Centropa* vol. 14, no. 1 (January 2014).

[10] Such as for example, the Hungarian-language only publication of *Törvénytelen avantgárd. Galántai György balatonboglári kápolnaműterme 1970-1973* [Illegal Avant-garde, the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio of György Galántai 1970-1973], eds. Júlia Klaniczay and Edit Sasvári (Artpool-Balassi, Budapest, 2003).

[11] *Loophole to Happiness*, Trafo Gallery Budapest, 11 November -30 December 2010; Futura Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague, 25 May - 7 August 2011; AMT Project, Bratislava, 23 September - 19 November 2011. More information: <http://www.translocal.org/translocalold/loophole/reclaim.html>

[12] Miklós Haraszti: *A Worker in a Worker's State* (New York: Penguin, 1977).

[13] Renewing the Curatorial Refrain: Sustainable Research in Contemporary Art, in *Curating Subjects III – Curating Research* (London and Amsterdam, Open Editions and de Appel, 2014 – forthcoming)

[14] Felix Guattari: *The Three Ecologies* (London: Continuum, 2000).

[15] *Navigating Ecological Times*, a study day at Whitechapel Gallery London, 30 August 2013
[http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/shop/product/category_id/1/product_id/1707?
session_id=1393697452d6f0a1a5cbc0e85a728c2ccc7dfbf8a6](http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/shop/product/category_id/1/product_id/1707?session_id=1393697452d6f0a1a5cbc0e85a728c2ccc7dfbf8a6)

[16] Franco Berardi Bifo, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles, Semiotexte, 2009).

[17] See for example, the Association of Art Historians Conference 2014 panel on Art History and Ecology:
<http://aah.org.uk/annual-conference/sessions2014/session2>

<http://exindex.hu/index.php?l=en&page=3&id=926>

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