Abstract: This paper examines the cross-pollination of the neo-Marxist critique of real existing socialism with the critical practices of the radical stream of the East European neo-avant-garde, and examines the extent to which the imprint of debates over the radical overhaul of the socialist system can be detected in the practices of artists and curators. Artistic affinities with the neo-Marxist debates that flared across the Eastern Bloc can be identified in a shared willingness to question authority, a subversive attitude to canonical thinking and a new interest in the role of an individual in socialist society. Considered also is the shift over the course of the 1970s from a belief in the possibility of a reformed socialism, to one of resignation, cynicism and frustration towards party bureaucracy, in which even the bureaucrats had stopped believing in the official ideology. This change in attitudes towards socialism is detected both in the change in tone in the writings of dissident theorists and in the approach of artists who could no longer muster the neo-avant-garde enthusiasm for the utopian desire to transform the world. The difficult paths taken by those, who sought to recover the radicalism in Marxist thought from under the blanket of state bureaucracy may also be viewed as a valuable source for contemporary social criticism of the post-communist order by a new generation of theorists and artists.

Keywords: Neo-avant-garde, Neo-Marxism, utopia, 1968, Prague Spring, Marxist Humanism, Praxis Group, Budapest School, real existing socialism, public art, socially-engaged art, conceptual art

When Bratislava-based dissident theorist Milan Šimečka entered into a debate about socialism with a group of student activists at Mainz University in the mid-70s it was, as his account reveals, a recipe for a classic misunderstanding across the Iron Curtain. While the young socialists from West Germany criticised the distortion of Marx’s teachings in the East, insisting that the students and workers in the homeland of Marx “would make a better job of socialism,” the Marxist theorist struggled to bridge the divide between the beliefs of the ‘young comrades’ and the reality of life in the socialist system, in the end telling them simply that ‘Karl Marx was one thing, and socialism in practice something else.’ In the wake of the encounter Šimečka conceded that he felt ‘ideologically burnt out, like a tree after a forest fire, and older than them by 50 long years of victorious socialism.’

The tension between the ideological promise of socialist ideas and the lived experience of ‘really existing socialism’ – a phrase that summed up the more mundane reality of the communist system in the post-Stalin era – motivated attempts emanating from intellectual and cultural circles to reform the Eastern Bloc from within. The high watermark for the reimagining of socialism, whether by making the system more responsive or humane, or by rediscovering the philosophical writings of the young Marx that had been drowned out by a cruder materialism associated with Engels and distorted further by Leninist or Stalinist deviations, came in the 1960s with the emergence of neo-Marxist schools of thought in Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland. Artistic affinities with the neo-Marxist debates that flared across the Eastern
Bloc can be identified in a shared willingness to question authority, a subversive attitude to canonical thinking and a new interest in the role of the individual in socialist society.

While the flourishing of innovative artistic experiments in the late 1960s and early 70s represented above all a reengagement with the desire in the radical wing of the historical avant-garde to break down the barriers between art and life, the ideological discontent and anti-authoritarian streak in the generation of young artists that emerged around 1968 also arose in relation to the new hopes and raised expectations associated with the radical reform of socialism. The conceptual, anti-hierarchical and dematerialised approaches that were characteristics of the practice of the neo-avant-garde, although not always channelled towards a specific political agenda, did suggest a critical and non-conformist attitude that was shared by the dissident theorists who moved in overlapping social circles. This paper examines the cross-pollination of the neo-Marxist critique of the socialist system with the critical practices of the radical stream of the East European neo-avant-garde, and examines the extent to which the imprint of debates over the radical overhaul of the socialist system can be detected in the practices of artists and curators.

The name of the journal Praxis, which was established in Zagreb in 1964 and published until 1975, conveys the importance of the concept of “praxis” for a neo-Marxist critique of a rigid model of socialism. In the words of one of the group’s leading philosophers, Gajo Petrović, the term can be defined as ‘universal – creative, self-creative activity, activity by which man transforms and creates his world and himself’. The journal was established on the principle of ‘ruthless criticism of all that exists’ and the idea that Marx’s thought is ‘the most adequate theoretical basis and inspiration for revolutionary activity’, and aimed to contribute to the ‘realization of a humane human community’.

Fig. 1. Želimir Koščević: Action Total, 1970. Courtesy Želimir Koščević
With its privileging of ‘human creative activity’ as a key factor in bringing about social change, sharp criticism of current conditions and internationalist ethos, the neo-Marxism of the Praxis group appealed to the most radical circles of the artistic neo-avant-garde. One of the most dynamic sites for contemporary art in Zagreb in the late 1960s and early 70s was the Student Centre Gallery, run by flamboyant curator Želimir Koščević, who along with cultivating the careers of the young generation of neo-avant-garde artists, undertook several curatorial experiments that in their critical approach to the established social order and institutional structures of the art world had some communalities with the neo-Marxist critique of the socialist state. In 1970, for example, Koščević initiated Action Total, a draft decree for the democratisation of art, which called for the abolition of painting, sculpture, graphic art, applied art, industrial design, architecture and urbanism, as well as the forbidding of all activities in the area of art history, and especially so-called art criticism, and the halting of all exhibitions in all galleries, museums, exhibition halls and art pavilions. (Figs. 1–2) The art of the day was rejected as ‘a purely reactionary influence in society, which today more than ever needs the ideational power of art.' Reverberations of the distant Chinese Cultural Revolution could also be detected in the denunciation in the decree of applied art as ‘servicing a select clientele with luxury goods’ and art history for ‘serving a small elite to satisfy their luxury needs’, while neglecting the need for ‘literacy campaigns, and building hospitals and cultural centres in cities and villages.'

The action, which heralded a series of important artistic interventions in the city in the early 1970s, involved direct intervention in urban space, such as posterign over advertising hoardings with abstract designs and distributing leaflets of the decree. The motivation for carrying out the action on the streets was the organisers’ belief that art should be accessible to everyone and go towards the masses, while galleries were only to be used in bad weather. Koščević also explained that his action was a prototype of a new relationship between art and society in which art has higher ambitions that just being a ‘form of escape from reality.’ Notably he quotes approvingly the Praxis philosopher Danko Grlić, for whom art is a real power that, with the ‘enthusiasm of its human mission, speaks about what kind of world our human world should and has to be, if it wants to remain human.’ Although Action Total can be located within the growth of a socially-engaged and politically-critical wing of conceptual art on the international stage, the radicalism of the decree also reflected the language and values of what was in this period a distinctly Yugoslav leftist position that criticised socialist reality using socialist rhetoric.

In their search for a more humanistic Marxism, the Praxis group were led into conflict with the authorities for pointing out the mismatch between the ideals of Yugoslav ‘self-managing socialism’ and the combination of autocratic rule and laissez-faire economics that characterised the system in practice. In the wake of the crushing of the Prague Spring, Danko Grlić condemned ‘the leaders of the countries in which socialism is represented as the constant and stubborn castigation of all creative powers of the nation and individuals, as a grey rule of bureaucratic know-it-all’s, as a system in which police decide what is ideologically right or of artistic value, as an
army barracks and the permanent enslavement of time-wasting today, for some apparently better, brighter and freer tomorrow. Although in this case his criticism was directed not against the Yugoslav authorities but to the countries of the Soviet bloc, it could also be read as a description of the failure of the socialist system per se. The Praxis philosophers were indeed labelled as traitors and ‘ultra leftists,’ especially in the wake of their support for the student protests of 1968, leading to university expulsions and the suspension of the group’s activities by the mid-1970s.

The neo-Marxism of Eastern Europe was to some extent a victim of Cold War cultural politics and was destined to be permanently misunderstood by, in particular, the Western left, who were often less than sympathetic to the notion of a left critique of socialism coming from within Eastern Europe. In addition to their tendency to sympathise with and make allowances for communist regimes, Western leftists also acted to maintain their terminological monopoly of the notion of the ‘new left,’ referring to the eastern variety as Marxist Humanism. This restricted use of terms might be compared with the way the notion of ‘conceptual art’ was until recently reserved for a select group of Western artists, while all the rest were at most engaged in a generic form of ‘conceptualism.’

The brief popularity of Maoism in the West around 1968 as a radical alternative to an ideologically compromised Soviet Marxism also attracted a select group of adherents in Eastern Europe. Philosophers Ágnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, in their 1986 book *Eastern Left, Western Left*, mention the small circle around dissident writer Miklós Haraszti as a rare example of Maoist sympathisers in Eastern Europe, and then proceed to explain the lack of appeal of the Chinese model of socialism. They make the point that both political activists and the ordinary people ‘without any kind of theory, but with a good political instinct’ had a ‘legitimate fear of presenting social grievances in the vocabulary of equality rather than freedom,’ since they feared that this would result in ‘the general equality of unfreedom.’ This analysis echoes Miklós Haraszti’s own account of his youthful attraction and subsequent disillusionment from Maoism: ‘From the mid-60s till August 1968, I and many other young people who were educated Marxists, sympathised very much with Maoism, although through the prism, through the lenses of the Western student movement. Maoism fulfilled the same need for us as it did for them – it was anti-Soviet and anti-bureaucratic […] After 68, my whole generation just realised that all we want is freedom not ideology.’

A bridge between Eastern and Western approaches to neo-Marxism was created in the context of non-aligned Yugoslavia, specifically in the setting of the Korčula Summer School, which was organised by the Praxis group between 1963 and 1973. These unique meetings of leading philosophers from both sides of the Cold War divide were an occasion for both leisure and creativity. The exceptional atmosphere of the Praxis circle is remembered by Rajko Grlić, a filmmaker and a graduate of the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, and son of Praxis philosopher Danko Grlić, who recounts: ‘They used to spend their Sundays mountaineering, they used to spend their summer holidays together, they used to celebrate any possible occasion, and at the same time work together. And those gatherings, which I clearly remember, were an unusual blend of Dionysian feast, circus attraction, and amazingly lucid philosophical repartees.’ This description suggests that collectivity, which is well documented in the case of art practices through the formation of artists’ groups and readiness to enter into collaborations, was also an aspect of the functioning of theoretical circles under socialism. It may well be that it was this sociability itself that in both cases gave members a non-institutional platform, through which to develop their ideas and the confidence to be more radical in their proposals.

The Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia was a turning point for the neo-Marxist participants in the Korčula summer school, marking for many the moment when hopes of a third way or reformed socialism were cruelly dashed. Rajko Grlić’s account of the fateful event experienced in the company of the annual island gathering of Marxist theoreticians, which that year focused on the topic of ‘Marx and revolution,’ is particularly poignant: ‘Somewhere around six o’clock on 21 August, my father woke me up saying, Rajac, the Russians have entered your Prague. We were sitting in silence, listening to the morning news on a small transistor radio. Then we went to the com-
munity centre where the school sessions used to be held. The Praxis editorial members quickly wrote a letter of protest and they started to sign it. Before long, a long queue was formed. I remember standing right behind Ernst Bloch, and a few people behind were Eric Fromm and Herbert Marcuse. That was my closest encounter with the history of philosophy.²⁰

Among the signatories of this protest document, which was in fact the first international protest against the invasion of Czechoslovakia, were several members of the Budapest School, including Ágnes Heller, for whom the Soviet-led military action represented a turning point away from support for socialist reformism towards the unequivocal rejection of the totalitarianism of East European states.²² The privileging of the notion of freedom in the approach of the Budapest School can be seen in Heller’s position that ‘human rights are only interpretations of the value idea of freedom in different contexts and relations, and from various standpoints,’²¹ in other words, for Heller, freedom is the ultimate value from which all other human rights can be derived. In the wake of the Soviet intervention in Prague and after the death of their protector György Lukács in 1971, Hungarian neo-Marxists of the Budapest School were subject to the repressive measures of a party bureaucracy that was increasingly intolerant of criticism. As Ferenc Fehér recalls, a resolution of the Political Bureau of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (MSZMP) in 1973 condemned the Budapest School as a ‘group of dangerous subversive elements’ and banned them from publication and participation in Hungarian cultural life, leading to dismissal from university posts and emigration to the West.²²

A similar focus on the importance of freedom can be found in the work of Hungarian neo-avant-garde artists, a tendency that was only strengthened by the debacle of the Prague Spring and was met by increasingly repressive measures by the authorities. The artistic gatherings that took place in the early 1970s in a rundown chapel on Lake Balaton were subject to the repressive measures of a party bureaucracy that was increasingly intolerant of criticism. As Ferenc Fehér recalls, a resolution of the Political Bureau of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (MSZMP) in 1973 condemned the Budapest School as a ‘group of dangerous subversive elements’ and banned them from publication and participation in Hungarian cultural life, leading to dismissal from university posts and emigration to the West.²²

In the summer of 1972, Galántai abandoned the practice of submitting exhibition proposals to the official artistic jury system for approval, due to the ‘impossibility’ of negotiating with the increasingly hostile party authorities, especially in view of the critical tone of the works and performances planned in the coming months.²⁴ Consequently, the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio provided a platform for artworks and curatorial projects that were explicitly critical of the socialist system, such as a meeting of artists from Czechoslovakia and Hungary in August 1972. The encounter included a tug of war to rip apart a magazine picture of Soviet troops playing tug of war during the occupation of Czechoslovakia and the action of handshakes between artists from each country, a peace gesture that touched a raw geopolitical nerve in the light of the participation of Hungarian troops in the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968.²⁵ Although the artists, curators, experimental theatre groups and writers that gravitated to Balatonboglár were able to maintain the sense of collective possibility and international solidarity within the dissident cultural community, on the larger scale of political and social life there proved to be no way back to the reformist spirit of the previous decade.

The art history of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde also brings to light examples of artworks that engaged directly with the intellectual efferescence of the neo-Marxist critique of really existing socialism. Gábor Altorjay’s²⁶ Anti-Pharmacy Bakunin (1968) referred to the untapped potential of the ideas of the nineteenth century Russian anarchist, whose portrait is bottled and framed, representing an explosive pharmaceutical potion. (Fig. 3) Bakunin as the genie in the bottle could be seen, especially in the specific context of 1968, as a reference to the Russian lib-

ertarian’s dispute with Marx over the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat and opposition to revolutionary violence. By putting extraordinary words into the mouths of ordinary citizens going about their daily lives under socialism, Tamás Szentjóby’s27 Kentaur (1973–75) can also be viewed as a subtle exploration of the implications of the neo-Marxist critique of the communist system. Footage reminiscent of films shot for educational or propaganda purpose is poetically rerouted by the artist to expose the emptiness of official ideological forms, reveal suppressed opinions about work, money and power under socialism, and hint at the unrealised creativity of the masses.

During the 1960s, up until the tragic events of August 1968, Czechoslovakia was a beacon for hopes within Eastern Europe and beyond that really existing socialism could be reformed to create a more humane social, economic and political system. During that period, artists fre-
quenty engaged in actions in public space that could be interpreted as moves towards the liberation of urban life from the straightjacket of official rhetoric and orchestrated celebrations. One such notable program, Happsoc I, was conceived in 1965 by artists Alex Mlynárčik,28 Stano Filko29 and theorist Zita Kostrová30 as a series of ‘realities’ to take place in Bratislava, between the socialist holidays of International Labour Day on 1 May and the Liberation of Slovakia by the Red Army on 9 May. The manifesto, which was mailed out as an invitation card, declared the whole city and its inhabitants to be an exhibition, and included a corresponding list of objects with precise numbers of lampposts, television aerials, cemeteries, men, women, dogs and so on. By subversively bringing the whole of the lived reality of the city into the autonomous realm of the artistic imagination, Happsoc I pointed towards the transformation of a regimented idea of socialist society into a more creative and fluid vision that chimed with the liberalising agenda of neo-Marxist reformists.

The conditions of normalisation that followed the Soviet invasion of 1968 pushed both political dissidence and artistic radicalism underground and to the margins of the public sphere, as well as causing irreparable damage to the idea that socialism could be saved or reformed. While some artists turned inwards, such as to more meditative and body-oriented practices carried out in private flats, others, such as Slovak artist Rudolf Sikora,31 turned their attention to the cosmos. Sikora in his work from the period points to the existence of the realms that rise above the morass of everyday politics, tracing for example in Czechoslovakia 1968 (1969), the ascension of the outline of the country from the red of conflict to a cloudy blue sky, and eventually up into a night sky filled with constellations. (Fig. 4) The work also chimes with the recollections of Milan Šimečka, who reminiscing about the Sixties in the volume history of Marxism published in 1978 concluded: ‘Marxism neither interprets the world nor changes it: it is merely a repertoire of slogans serving to organise various interests, most of them completely remote from those with which Marxism originally identified itself.’34

Over the course of the 1970s, with the solidification of the post-1968 order and the long freeze of the Brezhnev years, a shift occurred from a belief in the possibility of a reformed socialism, to one of resignation, cynicism and frustration towards a party bureaucracy in which even the bureaucrats had stopped believing in the official ideology. This change in attitudes towards socialism could be detected both in a change in tone in the writings of dissident theorists that had previously identified with the project to reform socialism from within and in the approach of artists, who could no longer muster the neo-avant-garde enthusiasm for the utopian desire to transform the world.

The decline in relevance and subsequent invisibility of the left critique of socialism ultimately lies in the fact that expectations for the reform of socialism from within proved in the end to be hopeless. Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski,35 who in the mid-1950s had been a driving force in the attempt to reignite the utopian spirit of socialism, in the end gave up the attempt to find the reason why socialism in practice had strayed so far from the ideals of Marxism, and was driven to accept that a major reason why ‘real existing socialism’ turned out so badly, was to be found in Marx’s writings, acknowledging problems with the blueprint and not just the way the Party carried it out, and famously concluding that a democratic communism would be like ‘fried snowballs.’ The epilogue of his three volume history of Marxism published in 1978 of resignation, cynicism and frustration towards a party bureaucracy in which even the bureaucrats had stopped believing in the official ideology. This change in attitudes towards socialism could be detected both in a change in tone in the writings of dissident theorists that had previously identified with the project to reform socialism from within and in the approach of artists, who could no longer muster the neo-avant-garde enthusiasm for the utopian desire to transform the world.

Reflection on the shifting ideological terrain of the late 70s and early 80s is visible in the work of Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović,35 whose collection of slogans from 1980 entitled Submit to Public Debate, are inscribed on canvases that for their background take the highly diluted and politically-pale tones of pink, rather than the radical colour red, which had been a regular reference point in neo-avant-garde artworks of the previous decade. (Figs. 5–6) Stilinović’s work picks out the empty words of official Yugo-

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slavic political discourse, in which the language of the socialist ideals of brotherhood and unity have been replaced by vague references, such as ‘common interests,’ ‘key tasks’ or ‘to completely fulfil obligations,’ pointing to the fragmentation and decay of political ideology in the late socialist public sphere.

In dissident writing, the shift from ‘red’ to ‘pink’ is present, for example, in the oeuvre of Miklós Haraszti, who in the early 70s could still conceive of worker’s everyday creativity as one of the last remaining sources of communism, expressed in the cult book *A Worker in a Worker’s State*. Based on the author’s experience of working for six months in a tractor factory, this explosively political account showed that contrary to the claims of the official ideology, workers in socialist factories were exploited in much the same way as those living under capitalism, such as through the effects of piecework. Haraszti’s book from the mid-80s, entitled *Velvet Prison: Artists under State Socialism*, has a much more pessimistic tone, and explores the many tactics developed by the system to control and redirect the desire for artistic freedom, describ-
ing in particular the process by which artists are co-opted by the state to neutralise their critique and the emergence of a new aesthetic culture has emerged in which censors and artists alike are entangled in a mutual embrace.357

From the perspective of later shifts to more moderate and non-Marxist positions, the enthusiastic and utopian writings of philosophers, poets and underground activists may appear as youthful excesses, although this does not diminish their value in understanding the sense of possibility that electrified the period around 1968. The difficult paths taken by artists and writers who sought to recover the radicalism in Marxist thought from under the blanket of state bureaucracy, holding up a mirror of socialist critique to a system that in practice turned its back on many of the principles of socialism and searching for the remains of the social ideal in the creativity of individual inhabitants of the dystopia of really existing socialism, may also be viewed as a valuable source for contemporary social criticism of the post-communist order by a new generation of theorists and artists.

In the early post-communist period, attempts to reform socialism from within were widely seen as a completely irrelevant point of reference for societies that had moved onto a radically different economic and social path. In that sense, in the 1990s it was not just the old photos of Marx and Lenin that found their way onto the scrapheap of history, but also the subtle positions of those who conceived of a reformed, humanised or more authentic version of socialism. Today, when views on global capitalism in the region are considerably more nuanced than immediately after the fall of communism – especially in the wake of the stalling of economic globalisation after the crisis of 2008 and revival of extreme right ideologies, hostile to the values of liberal democracy – attention is drifting back to the varieties of Marxism. Indeed, the vogue for Karl Marx was on vivid display at the central exhibition of the Venice Biennale in 2015, where actors undertook to read the whole of Das Kapital over the 7-month duration of the biennale. Contemporary art is opening up a path to reconsider the legacy of Marxism, although the singular position of the left critique of socialism that briefly flourished on the margins of the communist system remains largely shrouded in obscurity.

NOTES

1 Milan Šimečka (1930–1990), Czech and Slovak philosopher, who lived in Bratislava.
4 Gajo Petrović (1927–1993), Croatian philosopher, member of Praxis group and lived in Zagreb.
5 Quoted in SATTERWHITE, James, Varieties of Marxist Humanism: Philosophical Revision in Postwar Eastern Europe (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1992), 130.
7 Mikkó Harasztzi in conversation with Tamás Szentjóby, in Loophole to Happiness, FOWKES, Maja and Reuben, eds., (Budapest: Translocal, 2011), 42.
8 Želimir Ketešević (1959), Croatian curator and art historian, who lives in Zagreb and Samobor.
9 Danko Grlić (1923–1984), Croatian philosopher, member of Praxis group and lived in Zagreb.
12 Agnes Heller (1929), Hungarian philosopher, who lives and works in New York and Budapest.
13 Ferenc Fehér (1933–1994), Hungarian philosopher.
14 Mikkó Harasztzi (1945), Hungarian writer.
16 Mikkó Harasztzi in conversation with Tamás Szentjóby, in Loophole to Happiness, FOWKES, Maja and Reuben, eds., (Budapest: Translocal, 2011), 42.
17 Rajko Grlić (1947?), Croatian film director, who lives and works in Zagreb and Ohio.
18 Grlić, Rajko, ‘I witnessed the rise and fall of possibly the last social utopia,’ in Revolution I Love You, FOWKES, Maja and Reuben, eds (Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University, 2003), 39–44.
19 Ibid.
21 HELLER, Agnes, Freedom and Human Rights, in Eastern West, Western Left, op. cit., 151.
23 György Galántai (1941), Hungarian artist, who works and lives in Budapest.
24 See the chronology of Balatonboglár Chapel Studio in short [http://www.arpool.hu/boglar/1972/chrono72.html]
25 See A türelytényen avantgard: Galántai György Balatonboglár kápolnáműterem [Illegal Avant-Garde: György Galántai’s Chapel Studio in Balatonboglár], KLÀNCZAY, Júlia – SÁS-
VÁRTI, Edit, eds (Budapest: Artpool – Balassi, 2003). See also,
GALÁNTAI, György and KLÁNÍCZAY, Júlia, Artpool: The Experi-
mental Art Archive of East-Central Europe (Budapest: Artpool,
2013), 23–32.

26 Gábor Altorjay (1946), Hungarian artist and filmmaker,
who lives and works in Cologne.
27 Tamás Szentjóby (1944), Hungarian artist, who lives and
works in Budapest.
28 Alex Mlynárčik (1934), Slovak artist, who lives and works
in Slovakia.
29 Stano Filko (1937), Slovak artist based in Bratislava.
30 Zita Kostrová, Slovak art historian.
31 Rudolf Sikora (1946), Slovak artist, who lives and works
in Bratislava.
32 ŠIMECKA, op. cit., 14.
33 Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2009), Polish philosopher.
34 Kołakowski, Leszek, Main Currents of Marxism: The
Founders – The Golden Age – The Breakdown (New York:
35 Mladen Stilinović (1947), Croatian artist, who lives and
works in Zagreb.
36 See HARASZTI, Miklós, A Worker in a Worker’s State (Lon-
37 HARASZTI, Miklós, The Velvet Prison: Artists under State