

Introduction

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The SocialEast Forum considers the art and visual culture of Eastern Europe through collaborative projects, exhibitions and seminars. The forum is based on cooperation between leading scholars from across Europe, as well as the involvement of curators, artists and other professionals who deal in their work with issues of art and memory. The goal of SocialEast is to encourage comparative research into the art history of the countries of Eastern and Central Europe, as well as to examine how a revised understanding of the achievements and circumstances of East European art impacts on global interpretations of art history.

This special issue of *Third Text* is made up of a selection of papers given at the first four SocialEast Seminars held in 2006–2007 at Manchester Art Gallery, Ludwig Museum Budapest and Mimara Museum Zagreb, which dealt with the topics of Art and Ideology, Art and Documentary, Art and Revolution and Art and Memory. The choice of texts reflects the interdisciplinary approach cultivated by the Social-East Forum, with contributions from art historians, philosophers and curators. This issue broaches a wide range of subjects from the experimental theatre of post-Revolutionary Russia (Raunig), revisionist interpretations of Soviet monumental sculpture (Jungen) and post-Stalinist art in East Germany (Goeschen), to new perspectives on the competing histories of conceptual art in Eastern Europe (Weibgen, András, Mazzone), reflections on the memory of Communism in contemporary art (Szczerki), and discussion of the polemical treatment of official sculpture in new museums of Communism (Turai). Valuable theoretical orientation in the heterogeneous field of East European art is provided by papers addressing the key issue of how to write a history of Central-East European art (Piotrowski) and surveying the variety of modernisms in East European art (Šuvaković).

The SocialEast Forum is dedicated to improving knowledge about East European art, as well as contributing to the revision of global notions of modern art history formed during the Cold War. One of the key issues that mark out the research focus of the SocialEast Forum is discussion of the problems that arise in any attempt to create an internationally relevant account of art from the countries of Eastern Europe. This question points to issues such as whether it is possible, or even

desirable, to draw up a definitive and acceptable list of significant artists and art events from the region and introduce them to the international canon of twentieth-century art. Furthermore, we need to ask what is included and who is excluded from a revised art history of the countries of the former Eastern bloc, whether the experience of individual countries and the region as a whole is translatable and understandable for a wider international audience, and establish who is qualified to draw up such a list.

One problem that needs to be addressed is that of agreement on a shared and generally applicable framework and terminology for discussing East European art. Miško Šuvaković suggests that clear distinctions can be made between the aims and practices of the avant-garde (idealist utopia), neo-avant-garde (critical utopia) and the post-avant-garde, which he defines as 'analytical, critical, parodical, and simulational strategies of ending, critique, and second degree (meta) usage of modernist and avant-garde arts and culture'. Piotr Piotrowski argues that the history of modernism as defined in terms of style has only limited value for the consideration of the history of East European art, for which the defining feature was 'heterogeneous mutations'. A more effective approach would be to concentrate on the tensions within the local experience of art and the canon, rather than try mechanically to place local art into a wider canonical framework. Bettina Jungen gives us a convincing example of the deleterious effects of the Cold War canon on our understanding of particular artists and their work with her provocative reassessment of the Soviet sculptor Vera Mukhina in terms of modernism. In her analysis of Mukhina's best known monument, *Worker and Kolkhoz Farm Girl*, she brings out the political ambiguities towards collectivism in what has up to now been considered a paradigmatic official artwork of Stalinist Socialist Realism.

Another key issue considered by the SocialEast Forum, and many of the papers in this collection, is how to identify the specificities and particularities of the art and visual culture of Eastern Europe in this period. This question produces content-rich responses that hinge on issues such as the nature of the divide (or relationship) between official and alternative artistic cultures during the Socialist period. Furthermore, we need to evaluate the consequences of relative isolation from the international artworld, exclusion from the basic narrative of Western art history, and the absence of a commercial art market for artistic production in the region. Arguably, the absence of market pressures was from some points of view a positive factor, in for example the development of a distinctive and challenging path for conceptual art and performance art in Eastern Europe.

Gerald Raunig investigates the origins of the long-standing dilemma in Socialist art concerning the attitude to be taken towards the heritage of bourgeois culture on the one hand, and the means by which a truly proletarian art could be arrived at on the other. He identifies in the Theatre of Attractions of 1920s Soviet Russia 'a concrete anticipation of the concatenation of human organs, technical apparatuses, and social machines that distinguish the machine for Deleuze and Guattari'. Ulrike Goeschen gives us a more positive than expected evaluation of the creative possibilities of post-Stalinist official art in East Germany, arguing that the reappraisal and reinterpretation of the modernist movement,

and Expressionism in particular, in the 1960s ‘not only made an increase in artistic freedom within Socialism possible, but also led art back to its modernist origins’.

Another important aspect in this field of research is analysis of the process by which the picture of East European art has been constructed since the fall of Communism. This question points to the need for reflexivity in the research process and for analysis of the contexts within which new assumptions about East European art are being formed, including the role of curated exhibitions, survey publications and academic discussion. The SocialEast Forum aims to contribute to the emergence of a coherent and accurate picture of East European art history through the synergy of accounts by senior academics and artists who experienced the events at first hand, and the more dispassionate approach of younger researchers who find it easier to maintain a critical distance from the turbulent history of art during the Cold War.

Part of the problem in moving on from familiar Cold War positions is what Edit András calls the persistent desire of Western art critics to ‘keep the art discourse status quo alive and along with it to maintain their dominant position within it’. She goes on to show how despite the horror with which censorship is regarded by the art community, there have been recent cases in which the artworld has shown that it is ‘not above using control and even proposing punishment to maintain its norm-setting position in post-socialist conditions’. Among the conceptual lessons drawn from 1968 by Marian Mazzone is the insight that the deep threat that conceptual and experimental art of the time posed to Socialist regimes lay in the artists’ exploration of exchange and communication. In the period after the suppression of the Prague Spring, ‘the very act of creating work that attempted new pathways of information sharing was dangerously anti-normalisation’. Lara Weibgen comes at post-’68 Czechoslovak art from a different angle, and provides further evidence of the singularities of East European art history, rejecting superficial similarities between Czechoslovak and American body art to explore the specific contexts that informed the performances of Jan Mlcoch and Petr Štembera in the 1970s, not least of which was the precedent set by Jan Palach’s self-immolation in 1969.

Andrzej Szczerski gives an interpretation of recent contemporary art dealing with the memory of Communism, and specifically the People’s Republic of Poland. He shows how artists have sought to intervene in and reflect on the diversity of public attitudes towards the Communist era which range from ‘complete condemnation, through naive nostalgia, to an unquestioned appreciation of its history’. Hedvig Turai deals with a similar problematic of changing attitudes towards the official art of the former regime. She shows how the Budapest Statue Park has sought to depoliticise monumental art, but at the same time stopped short of considering official sculpture as ‘autonomous, ideology free art’. In the resulting vacuum, ‘everyone is “free”, that is, at a loss how to relate to the Socialist past’.

There is much work to be done in assessing and understanding the art produced in Eastern Europe, both on the level of particular national contexts and in understanding the singularities of art production under Socialism. New comparative accounts are emerging through the confrontation of the histories of art of Eastern Europe with previously

stable accounts of international art history. This process involves more than bringing in a few extra names into the existing canon and arguably necessitates a challenge to the narratives and assumptions that have structured dominant art historical accounts. The knowledge gained through the process of addressing the legacy of the East European art experience, including its heterogeneity, disobedience to accepted canons and the quality of much of the art that was produced by artists operating subversively within the system or in opposition to it in alternative cultural settings, can be seen to feed back in to contemporary artistic production. In short, a more complex and nuanced picture than the familiar stark binary divisions of Cold War art history is emerging, and the papers collected in this special issue of *Third Text* aim to offer an assessment of the current state of research and the first fruits of the collaborative work of the SocialEast Forum (<http://www.socialeast.org>).