

The Art from “Other” Europe

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Cultural Domestication - Instinctual Desire: Interpretations and Insights

“The critical geography would aim at disclosing the center of power, and - like feminist, post-colonial and other deconstructive practices - would produce a discourse of a pluralistic, non-hierarchical concept of the subject, or to be more exact, on the multi-subjectivity of European dimensions. Such a study would provide a critical approach to the question of similarities and differences between the centers and margins, but also - and this is perhaps the most interesting challenge of ‘after the wall’ European culture - between many geographical margins themselves.”¹
(Piotr Piotrowski)

The history of art that we had known for a long time was the history of European, and since the beginning of the 20th century also North American art. However, cultural space is much larger and movements of art much more complicated, and when one starts thinking about history of art in other geographical frameworks, one gets a radically different picture of what art is, and what it does. Face to face with both poststructuralist and postmodernist debates about sustainability of historical linearity and universal culture, and the development of visual arts within the last twenty years, there can be no doubt that the concept of “Western” art lost its former coherence and hegemony.

Although most of these critical discussions have been dealing with post-colonialism and reflected the relationship between the First and the Third world, there exists other, less visible, yet also very important discourse that is focused on the cultural divisions in Europe itself. Since the mid 1980s, a number of intellectuals have been occupied with the role of Eastern European art in the context of international modernism and Western art in general. When the Berlin Wall fell down in 1989, these debates

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intensified. Whether their protagonists lived on one or the other side of the former Iron Curtain, they analyzed reasons why East and West did not share art history for most of the 20th century, and whether the relationship between the two histories is based on opposition, complementarity, or imitation, or the combination of all three elements.

The ideological division between the two parts of Europe that started with disrupted development of modernism in Russia in the 1930s, and tragically escalated during the Cold War all over the former East bloc, has made enormous impact on reading and understanding art and its history in the "other" Europe. East Europe was mostly treated as a periphery - as place that produces delayed derivations or local dialects of art processes happening in the center, i.e. in the "right" side of Europe.

In 1995, German art historian Hans Belting published the second, revised version of his ground-breaking book *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte* (The End of Art History).² He wrote that any attempt to compare Eastern European art with its Western counterpart will necessarily show a different stage of development of the two, and will underline their different social role. Reflecting the situation in the post-communist countries, he claimed that the Western culture which arrogates the ideal value of freedom and material value of the capital claims to be the universal heir of history whose norms are generally applicable on art regardless of its place of origin, and thus also of its different historical, social, and political contexts. At this time, as a consequence of intensive critical debates about the hegemony of Western concept of art, and also of emerging art impulses coming from the East, there appeared a number of remarkable (although often problematic and controversial) exhibitions that either mapped the post-war and contemporary art in the long-enclosed part of Europe, or tried to bring together artists from both parts of the old continent.³ There comes as no surprise that after more than forty years of totalitarian regime that controlled all spheres of life, prohibited the freedom of speech, and forced many independent intellectuals and artists either to the exile or to work in the "gray zone" (in many cases, the only way of shutting them up was to imprison them), most Eastern European artists wanted to enter the supposedly free world of the West. However there was also a counter-move. Some Eastern European nations that were oppressed by foreign superpowers for centuries, wanted to build their cultural policy on nationalist premises, trying to resurrect their national identity. Thus next

to the desire to become part of the international, i.e. Western structures, there also existed a strong attempt to fix art in time and space, and derive it from heroic national history and myths.

As we can see now, both of these tendencies were idealist. The boundaries between the East and the West did not blur, and artists coming from the East are still stigmatized as the "others", whether their otherness is seen as the mark of exotic originality, or marginality. After the initial craving for the post-communist culture, the Western art world is still cautious of Eastern European art. On the other hand, the patriotic tendencies that appeal to the masses and their national pride are not only idealist but also dangerous; when used as propaganda that is to install the purity of the national state and its culture, they can eventually turn into a xenophobic weapon, and effectively contribute to the ethnic war conflicts. Facing the troubles related to both naïve internationalism that hides the power interests of the West, and similarly naïve, yet also blind, populist and potentially dangerous nationalism that is based on racism or ethnic hatred, it is obvious that the discussions about the critical geography of art are still urgently needed for putting forth new theoretical and methodological categories applicable to the discussions of European art in the 20th century.

As much as the duality between Western cultural internationalism and non-Western nationalism cannot capture the actual situation and the needs of artistic communities, the old dichotomy between center and periphery is too shallow to fully explain the reasons of existing hierarchy of different cultural systems. The boundaries between centers and peripheries are never fixed - and the more global the world becomes, the faster they shift. What is the center of cultural movement at one historical moment can soon after become its periphery, and vice versa. Moreover, one should not forget that the closer we look at a specific place or region, the dichotomy multiplies: not only that all centers have peripheries (to quote Russel Ferguson, "When we say marginal, we must always ask marginal to what?")⁴, but peripheries also produce power relations and have their centers and margins. And, last but not least, what might seem a center for one group of people, might be considered periphery for others. East Europe certainly carries different connotations in Western Europe and in, say, the United States. After all, East Europe is not just one.

Although not many contemporary artists living in post-commu-

nist countries address these issues directly in their work, such complex and often confusing questions echo in their cultural environment. Their position is somehow dubious: their work is not different enough to comply with Western interests in exotic art and culture (most Eastern European cultures are "white", Christian, and historically part of the Western civilization), but it still carries visual and intellectual codes that are specific to the culture they come from. And yet, it seems that artists in this part of Europe (since the enlargement of the E.U. last year, it is rather ironically called "new Europe", even though former Soviet bloc countries are still economically behind, and for some also culturally backward) do not suffer of any inferiority complex. They might still fight terrible underfunding of arts and a disinterest in art of newly formed political garnitures; they might be disillusioned with a slowly growing art market in their countries and with arrogance of the uncultivated, snobby, and kitch-loving, nouveau-riches art collectors; they might be frustrated that Western curators rarely come to their studios for a visit, and that their chance of being represented in some of the renowned international art collections is still very slim.

However, during the last fifteen years, they gained not only the freedom to speak, to chose whatever form and media they wish to work in, to travel and get acquainted with art all over the world, but also a certain level of self-confidence that allows them to establish artists' run galleries, publish magazines, organize art festivals and exchange programs. Simply, life of artists in Eastern Europe does not fundamentally differ from life of their colleagues in the West. What remains different is the context in which they work.

It might be anachronistic or even undesired to discuss the specificities of, for instance, Czech art. Such an attempt might smack of those very nationalist clichés one should undermine. And yet, it is undeniable that artists who live in the Czech Republic (temporarily, or permanently, of Czech origin or not) are confronted with much information and with many impulses, debates, cultural codes, historical traumas, but also biases that they cannot deny their cultural locatedness.

This locatedness is neither about their identification with the Czech nationhood, nor about their loyalty to the local traditions. Rather, it is the intersection of the artists' diverse socio-cultural but also physical experiences of the space he/she lives in, loves, hates, idealizes, confronts, criticizes, parodies, adores, denies... Locatedness does not equal mental

or bodily fixity; just as the culture that surrounds us changes from different perspectives and in the flow of time, the locatedness changes as one moves from place to place, and encounters different people. As opposed to belonging (somewhere, to somebody), locatedness is about longing - it is an open-ended process of trying to define oneself and one's identity in the relationship to others.

If I wrote that we still need new, non-hierarchical concepts of cultural and art geography, I can add that we also need new forms of cultural and art locatedness that would challenge the old dichotomies between East and West, centers and peripheries, public and private, cultural and domestic, global and local, reality and illusion, sensuality and rationality, desire and denial... - simply that would contribute to the deconstruction of universalism, and show the world around and within us as a labyrinth of often contradictory meanings, as a site of both cultural domestication and instinctual desire.

¹ Piotr Piotrowski, "Central Europe in the Face of Unification", in: ArtMargins/2003, <<http://www.artmargins.com/>>www.artmargins.com

² Hans Belting, *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte: Eine Revision nach Zehn Jahren*. München 1995.

³ Among the most important exhibitions were: "Europa - Europa. Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarde im Mittel- und Ost-Europa" (Europe - Europe. One Century of Central and Eastern European Avantgarde), Bonn, 1994; "Der Riss im Raum. Positionen der Kunst seit 1945 in Deutschland, Polen, Slowakei und Tschechien" (Rupture in Space. Positions of Art since 1945 in Germany, Poland, Slovakia and Czech Republic), Berlin 1994/5; "After the Wall. Art and Culture in post-Communist Europe", Stockholm 1999; "Aspekte/Positionen. 50 Jahre Kunst aus Mitteleuropa 1949 - 1999 (Aspects/ Positions. 50 Years of Art from Central Europe 1949 - 1999)", Vienna 1999.

⁴ Russel Ferguson, "Introduction: Invisible Center", in: *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. By R. Ferguson et al. New York - Cambridge, MA, 1990, p. 9.