

POP ART

WHY WERE THERE NO GREAT

CURATORIAL PROJECTS IN EASTERN EUROPE IN THE 1960S?

by **Piotr Piotrowski**

The 1960s had more than one face. Although pop culture spread throughout the world rapidly during the decade, this did not mean that pop art, which is of course not the same thing as pop culture, followed.

On the contrary, we still are faced with a problem: American and Western European methodological imperialism frames global art via stylistic premises that originated in North Atlantic art history. One of the groundbreaking texts dealing with the question of methodological imperialism and pop art was recently written by the Hungarian author Katalin Timár: *Is Your Pop Our Pop?*¹ This was followed by the work of Polish scholar Anna Kołos, in her (regrettably, unpublished) M.A. thesis, *Quoting pictorial tradition in the poetics of pop art in Polish, Hungarian, and Slovak Art in the age of socialism.*² The idea these two authors share is that acceptance of the term “pop art” by local art history is problematic. Peripheral art works are caught in a kind of trap between a general vocabulary of style, which originated elsewhere (in the case of pop art the origins are of course North America and Britain), and local specificity that is not readable from the outside. This constitutes a challenge for local art critics, who must find a way out of this trap. While Timár’s article is largely critical of Hungarian art-historical discourse, Kołos, in her thesis, tries to analyze particular techniques shared by both North American and Central-East European artists, such as “quoting pictorial tradition,” rather than depicting a general view of this sort of art in the region. Finally, in the precise and detailed analysis Kołos pro-

vides, we are able to find some general, international similarities between artists working in those two art-historical contexts, as well as differences. Nevertheless, there are some art historians who have no objection to the use of the term “pop art” in local contexts, such as Katalin Keserü in Hungary, or Sirje Helme in Estonia.³ In other countries, although this vocabulary is used (for example in Slovakia), there are no monographs on local pop art like those by the foregoing authors.

WHATEVER MIGHT BE SAID of pop art techniques and art-historical discourses used in Hungary, and later in Estonia, (and less frequently in other countries), one would be hard-pressed to say that the 1960s was an era of pop in the region, especially one with North American influences. In Eastern Europe, pop art did not reach the level of being a significant style, and there were no large-scale international curatorial projects dealing with it.

The first question, then, might be: Why were artists in Eastern Europe in the 1960s not so interested in North American pop art, as opposed to artists in, say, Sweden? Concerning Sweden, let me simply point out that, although formally speaking, especially from the military point of view, it was a neutral country (and still is), from the Eastern European perspective, it was (and still is) seen as a Western country. Although the West was idealized in the East, and the US has enjoyed a great prestige in Eastern Europe (and still does), the cultural map at that



Képarchitektúra, László Kassak, 1922.

Ivan Picelj, *Exat 51, Kompozicija IV*, 1957/1958.



time, at the beginning of the 1960s, was more complicated. An easy answer might at first present itself as to why there was no North American art (e.g. pop art) here: there was not enough pop culture background in the region, at least not to the same extent as in the US and Western Europe. Yet the situation is more complicated. Pop art was definitely “charming” for local artists (as was pop culture for general audiences), and some of them, such as László Lakner, who saw Robert Rauschenberg’s famous exhibition in Venice in 1964, were influenced by it. It was a sort of new Western art. If we take into account, on the one hand, that pop art referred directly to popular reality, that is, to non-artistic reality, which was fascinating for the artists, and – on the other – that Eastern European artists strongly supported modernist values, such as art autonomy, which in turn was a reaction for socialist realism understood as political propaganda (i.e. engaged in reality), we could understand that the epistemological status of pop art might be complicated for Eastern European artists.

LET ME DEVELOP these ideas in a couple of arguments.

1 The background of pop art was a sort of cultural trash – popular iconography, everyday, ordinary objects, and so on. It was a way to understand the contemporary, present-day reality; that is, it was quite a different approach to the world from that expressed by high modernism – in case of the US: abstract expressionism. In Eastern Europe the point of departure for postwar modern art – which actually began in the post-Stalinist period, simultaneously, curiously enough, with the emergence of pop art in the US (that is, during the late 1950s/beginning of the 1960s) – was high modernism, as an alternative to socialist realism. The trauma of the mandatory, the only art that could be shown publicly, which went together with political terror, was so strong that it resulted in a conviction that only autonomous high art is able to defend the high culture values that at the same time guarantee artistic freedom. The popular culture at the beginning of the 1960s was extremely pure, and it would be very difficult to become fascinated by it. If there is something precisely similar to the methodology of pop art – that is a sort of critical analysis of everyday realities – it would be soc-art, which emerged much later in the USSR. Artists as Eric Bulatov, in the mid-1970s and later, referred to the ambiguities of the everyday communist iconosphere of the Soviet Union.

2 That was of course the desire for American trash, such as Coca Cola cans, popular comic books, illustrated magazines with movie stars, etc. It was not, however, the everyday realities here, rather a charming cult of the reach of free culture. If we thus look

at – let’s say – Gyula Konkoly’s pictures (a Hungarian artist), and some of the references to Western popular culture found in them, we see Western influences and popular culture, almost as iconography, quoted as stylistic references (i.e. pop art), *très-à-la-mode* Western art, art novelty coming from the West.

3 It has also happened that these references have been combined with *informel* painting, as in the case of Endre Tót, to mention another Hungarian of that period. This is important since *informel* style was able to elevate any art production to the level of high culture, i.e. free art, so important in the post-socialist-realism period. If we now take into account Robert Rauschenberg’s *combine painting*, which in some sense was behind Hungarian art experiments, we can see that the relation between the everyday object and abstract expressionist references was in fact the reverse. The idea wasn’t to elevate the banal reality to the level of high art, but on the contrary, to discredit high art itself.

4 The foregoing is in no way meant to suggest that there was no “figurative” painting in Eastern Europe in the 1960s. The figurative painting that existed, however, was of course based on a different tradition – I would call it non-socialist realism – and referred to different problems, mostly existential, usually suppressed by genuine American pop artists.

THE SECOND QUESTION I would like to raise here might be: Shall we draw the conclusion that there was no interest at all within Eastern Europe in North American culture, again, as opposed to the interest Sweden at the beginning of the 1960s? At that time, to be sure, Eastern Europeans did not buy into the idea of New York’s having “stolen the idea of modern art.” They still believed that the capital city of international contemporary art was Paris. If we look at Entre Tôt’s painting, it is not even clear whether we are seeing a North American echo of pop art, or French *Les Nouveaux Réalistes* – something entirely different, of course, having become very popular in the 1960s in Slovakia because of the close relation of local artists to Pierre Restany. Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, one of the authors of the book *Paris: Capital of the Arts, 1900–1968*, wrote polemically to Serge Guilbaut:

“Despite the supposed impenetrability of the Iron Curtain, a steady exchange between Paris and Eastern Europe took place from 1946 onwards. A plethora of exhibitions traveled in both directions; periodicals and catalogues were privately circulated; artists and critics, sponsored by cultural and political bodies, travelled both West and East. Relations were never broken off

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completely, even during the ‘darkest nights of Stalinism’, although they were closely monitored by the authorities. The Iron Curtain might be compared to a two-way mirror, able to hide and reveal several Parises: the dreamt-of ‘fount of modernity’; the ‘communist’ Paris of Daumier

and socialist realism; and finally the ‘forbidden’ Paris of existentialist anxiety and of the liberating gestures of *Tachism*. These diverse ways of looking at Paris from the position of an Eastern European observer might be aligned chronologically to form a tentative sequence which would unfold from the brief episode of the return to modern Paris in the period directly after the war (1945–48), through the rise of the ‘Iron Curtain Paris’ constructed by Stalinism (1949/50–55), to the Paris ‘regained’ with the post-Stalinist ‘Thaw’ (from 1956).”

In terms of the 1960s, our primary interest, she added:

“During the 1960s, however, the absolute hegemony of the Parisian dream was beginning to turn into a nostalgic memory, even in Poland. The freedom to look at Parisian art mattered increasingly, but so did the chance to be seen there. Throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, Paris was undeniably the city in which artists from Eastern Europe were exhibited by both state museums and private galleries. At the helm was Denise Rene, with her successive displays of the pioneering Polish Unism (1928) and geometrical abstraction in 1957, of abstract Yugoslavian art in 1959, and of work by the Hungarian constructivist László Kassák in 1960 and 1967. A young

PIOTR PIOTROWSKI IN MEMORIAM

IT’S NOT ALWAYS that the departure of someone whom we have a professional relationship with leaves a physical sense of loss. But this is how the death of Piotr Piotrowski has affected us, his colleagues at Södertörn University. He was Professor ordinarius in the Art History Department, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland, and its chair from 1999 to 2008. His field of research, world art history, departed from the modern and contemporary art worlds of Eastern and Central Europe. Piotrowski systematized cases from this area into a relational geography of



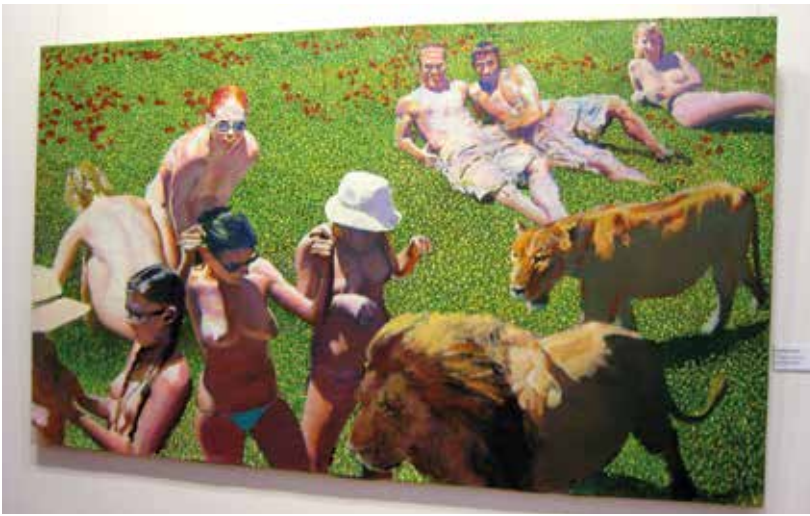
art, or what may be called a horizontal art history. His narrative forms a relentless critique of the universalist voice of Western-Eurocentric hegemonic art history with its conceptual and aesthetic canon of styles, artists, and models of influences. It does so with a theoretical

and methodological rigor that could only be earned through an extensive knowledge of marginalized archives.

PROFESSOR PIOTROWSKI’S article in this issue of *Baltic Worlds* is an excellent example of his method and style: a witty attack on

fundamental concepts. We cannot assume that art markets, and hence pop culture, work the same way in the US, Sweden, and (post-communist) Central European countries.

So how is a concept such as “pop” to be approached? Contemporary culture may contain expressions of postcommunist, postnational, postcolonial, and postmodern modes of production, but this is also the ground for Piotrowski’s thesis on why and where cultural situatedness must be acknowledged and universalism rejected. Studies in the art history of metropolitan nineteenth- and twentieth-century France or the English-speaking world should not be abandoned in favor of regions such as the Baltics, East-Central Europe, or indeed South America. Since artists and



Painting by Gyula Konkoly, at the Hungarian National Gallery.

Polish artist, Jan Lebenstein, received the Grand Prix at the Premiere Biennale de Paris in 1959.”⁴

Naturally, this does not mean that there was no relation at all between Eastern Europe and New York – the famous exhibition of Polish contemporary painting at the MoMA in 1961 attests to this – but it was definitely less visible and less recognized by both art criticism and the authorities than – let’s say – the exhibition of Polish painters at the Musée National d’Art Moderne in Paris the same year. However, in the course of the 1960s, the situation gradually started to change. By the end of the decade, London and New York had replaced Paris as places of privilege for Eastern Europeans. It was not, however, pop art (with the exception of Hungary, as noted) but rather happenings and conceptual art that captured the attention of Eastern Europeans. Therefore, the real change of “art-geographical desire”, or the change in both virtual and real cultural trajectory, took place here by the end of the 1960s, and was connected with the entirely different aesthetics and art theory.

Now, let’s come back to the beginning of the 1960s, and ask

the third question: if transnational pop art curatorial projects were not to be found in Eastern Europe as the crucial art-historical experience, were there others in the “Era of Pop”, instead? I assume that the only large-scale transnational, indeed global, curatorial project at that time in Eastern Europe was the *New Tendencies Biennial* in Zagreb, established in 1961 and running through 1973. It was organized – and this is extremely interesting from an art-geographical point of view – on the basis of the South American artist, Almir Mavignier. (However, it was based in West Germany, actually in Ulm,

which is extremely important because of the Hochschule für Gestaltung, founded by Max Bill in the 1950s, an artist extremely important for Latin American concretism).⁵ Let’s look into this more closely.

Almir Mavignier, a Brazilian artist who moved to Germany, is one of many who created a sort of bridge between Europe and Latin America, especially in the field of – generally speaking and broadly understood – neoconstructivism. To live in Ulm was, as noted, significant because of Max Bill, whose influences over Latin American concretism cannot be overestimated. Another theme might be the argument about how relationships between Latin America and Eastern Europe looked in the 1950s/1960s in terms of the above-mentioned broadly understood neoconstructivism. And then we have the striking comparison of the background of two curatorial projects, namely the Biennial in São Paulo, established in 1951, and, ten years later, the *New Tendencies*, also organized in the biennial format, albeit with a much shorter lifespan. In both cases there was an ambition to be modern, universal, and global; in both cases neoconstructivism (in Brazil’s case concretism) was the vehicle of inter-national

historians insist on connecting with metropolitan art concepts and institutions rather than with each other as Others, a relational geography of art needs to account for why this is so. And, until the very end, Piotrowski was working on a project to globalize Polish art as a counter-model to the “post-” histories that presently function as gatekeepers to the dominant academic discourse on contemporaneity. In fact, in 1999, when Professor Piotrowski visited Sweden as a researcher in the Moderna Museet exhibition *After the Wall*, he insisted on an anti-universalist approach to studies in the production of art and art history. Piotrowski’s work continuously challenges historians to study the spatial dynamics and temporality of West and East; its connections

between individuals, work, and institutions far beyond Europe.

Piotr Piotrowski’s well-known publications include *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe* (2005, 2009, 2011), *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (2010, 2012), *Meanings of Modernism* (1999, 2011), *Art after Politics* (2007), and *Critical Museum* (2011, 2013). In parallel to his work in academia, Piotrowski had a long-standing engagement with art exhibitions and criticism. He was the coeditor of the annual journal *Artium Quaestiones* (1994–2009), Director of the National Museum in Warsaw, 2009–2010, and Senior Curator of Contemporary Art at the National Museum in Poznan, 1992–1997.

Over the years, Professor Piotrowski was

invited to several institutions as a research fellow. He took part in the international conference *Art in Transfer: Curatorial practices and transnational strategies in the Era of Pop* (November 6–8, 2014, at Södertörn University and Moderna Museet, organized by Charlotte Bydler and Annika Öhrner).

We are deeply honored to have had Piotr Piotrowski as a CBEES guest researcher as recently as November 2014. His extraordinary enthusiasm and commitment to criticality and democratic ideals in academia has left indelible marks far beyond the discipline of art history.

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“THE ARTISTS BELIEVED THEIR EFFORTS WERE PART OF A STRUGGLE AGAINST THE ELITE- ORIENTED ART MARKET.”

culture, i.e. “inter-” and “national” at the same time, or an attempt to internationalize the local; in both cases emerging and modernized countries wanted to be recognized as the protagonist of the utopia of technology, science, industrialization, and so on. Of course, there were significant differences, too.

The São Paulo Biennial was initiated by a private, successful businessman, and its structure followed the Venice Biennial format with national delegations from around the world. Its crisis came in 1969 because of the international boycott caused by the increase of terror and censorship, introduced by the local junta in December, 1968. However, the biennial still exists, as a large global event. The *New Tendencies* was much more specific, focusing on particular art only, organized by the artists and critics, with the support, of course, from the local administration. It was definitely a smaller-scale event, showing invited artists and their art, not national teams. Its failure resulted from internal artistic causes, but the failure was also connected to the end of the relatively liberal policy in Croatia, called “Croatian Spring”, followed by stronger centralization of Yugoslavia. Let’s save these observations, however, for a different occasion.

Nevertheless, Almir Mavignier, because of his role in founding *New Tendencies* in Zagreb, would play a very important role in art developments in Eastern Europe. He had become familiar with the local art scene – probably the most vivid, international, and dynamic in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s – ever since he stopped there on his way from the Venice Biennale to Egypt in the summer of 1960. While returning to Ulm, he wrote, on February 24, 1961, a famous letter to Matko Meštrović, a young art historian and art critic, the key person in creating this series of exhibitions, actually in French, a language widely used in Eastern Europe at that time.⁶ He suggested the idea of organizing a global show in Zagreb with artists from Germany, Italy, France, Switzerland, Austria, and Brazil. In *New Tendencies 1* (this one written in plural), there were only two South American artists, and they were the ones who used to live in the West, actually in Western Europe: Almir Mavignier himself and Julio Le Parc, an Argentinean living in France. In the next exhibition, *New Tendencies 2* (still in plural), in 1963, there were, in addition to Mavignier and Le Parc, Martha Boto (Argentina/France), Carlos Cruz-Diez (Venezuela/France), Luis Tomasello (Argentina/France), and Gregorio Vardanega (Argentina/France/Italy). In the third exhibition, *New Tendency*, in 1965, Martha Boto and Waldemar Cordeiro were present from South America, though the exhibition was open to Eastern European countries other than Yugoslavia: the Group Dviženije from the Soviet Union, as well as Edward Krasiński from Poland and Zdeněk Sýkora from Czechoslovakia were shown.⁷ The third exhibition, organized as *Tendencies 4* (in plural again, but without the adjective “new”) was not put together until 1969, already in a different historical context and along with different theoretical questions. Let me just mention that it was anticipated by a couple of different events and side projects (workshops, symposia, shows),

also under the title “Bit International”, and slogans “Computers and Visual Research”, “The Theory of Information and the New Aesthetics”.

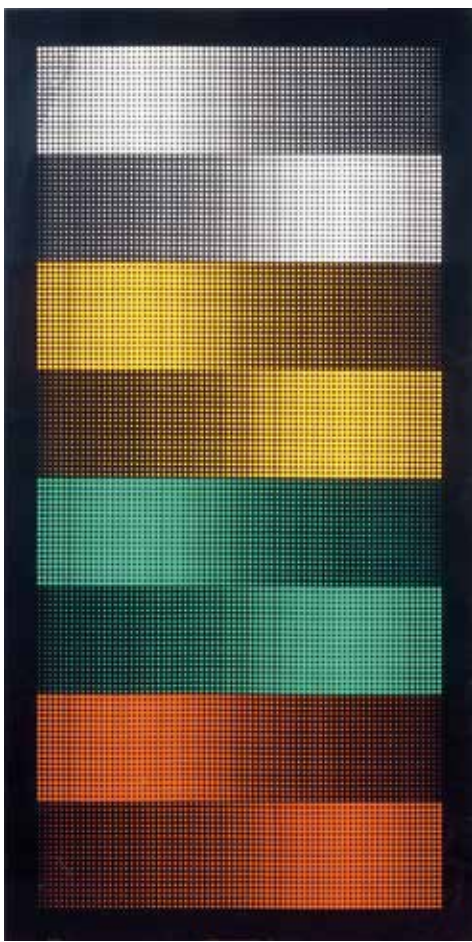
To return to the beginning of the *New Tendencies*, it is worthwhile to focus on a couple of general questions.

As Margit Rosen has written in the

enormous retrospective catalogue of this series of events, which she also edited, new technology and new hopes and expectations in terms of aesthetic, social, and political potential were the main backdrop to the *New Tendencies*. From an art-historical point of view, this project was clearly distinct from abstract expressionism, or – in French terms – *Tashism*, because it rejected the idea of “genius”, replacing it with a concept of “research”, as well as industrial production and science, and connecting them with “democracy”, because of widely accessible mass-reproduction and multiplicities of serially produced art works. The artists believed their efforts were part of a struggle against the elite-oriented art market.⁸ In my opinion, however, neither neoconstructivism nor pop art had anything to do with democracy. Technology, which lay behind neoconstructivism, led to technocracy, rather than to democracy, and the consumerism that informed pop art was populist, not democratic. They both were somehow (in different ways) anti-elite, but far from democratic, if by the latter we mean an agonistic agora, rather than shopping mall or perfectly organized factory.

LET ME ADD that it was not only *Tashism* that was a negative point of reference of the *New Tendencies*; it was also – what is important for us and what is much more generally characteristic of neoconstructivism – pop art. This sort of art (i.e. neoconstructivism) was somehow close to *The Responsive Eye* organized by William Seitz at the MoMA in New York in 1965, promoting what he has called “optical art,” or “op art.” Also in Europe, as Jerko Denegri argues in the above-mentioned retrospective, the *New Tendencies* movement was connected with such projects as the Moving Movement exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (1961), later shown at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and elsewhere. There were more post-*informel* abstract artists consistent with the focus of both Almir Mavignier and Matko Meštrović, such as the ZERO Group from Germany, the Paris-based Groupe de recherche d’art visuel founded in 1961, Padua Gruppo N, people around *Azimuth & Azimut* in Milan, and others.⁹ The local situation should be also on the agenda, if not the primary point of reference. If Zagreb had not been so interesting for Almir Mavignier, he would not have proposed Matko Meštrović as organizer of the exhibition. In the text mentioned above, Denegri cites the Exat





Almir Mavignier,
Composition Cinétique,
1968.



Endre Tót exploring the idea of nothingness in the 1970s.

51 group, which emerged shortly after Josip Broz-Tito broke his relation with Stalin and left the Eastern Bloc. Exat 51 was a very influential group of artists in Zagreb, who formed the immediate art-historical context for the *New Tendencies*.¹⁰ Let me also add another Zagreb group of artists that emerged in the city in 1959, namely the Gorgona group. Although these artists had declared a different type of art, different theory and attitudes, and different politics and aesthetics – including rejecting the visual from the artwork (actually conceptual approach) – some of them, such as Julije Knifer, took part in the exhibitions. Also, Matko Meštrović himself was connected with the Gorgona group.

Now let me draw your attention to the position of neoconstructivism itself in the whole region, i.e. Eastern Europe, in the 1960s, to provide the broader geographical framework of this curatorial project. Constructivism as such has a very strong tradition in Eastern Europe. Because of its Soviet origins, it became widespread in the region very quickly in the 1920s, especially in Poland, where Henryk Stażewski, Katarzyna Kobro, and Władysław Strzemiński had close relations to Russian artists, especially Kazimir Malevich, but it also quickly became important in Hungary because of Lajos Kassák. Kobro and Strzemiński died at the very beginning of the 1950s, but Stażewski in Poland and Kassák in Hungary were still alive in the 1960s, and they created strong circles of younger artists who became responsible for the revival of constructivism. Their personal role in the revitalization of constructivism was very important. To a lesser extent, we can say the same about Czechoslovakia, which does not mean, however, that in the 1960s neoconstructivism was not visible there. In 1963, several outstanding Czech artists founded the group Křižovatka, then the Synteza group in 1965, and finally the Club of Concretists in 1967. The first attempt towards constructivist revival (aside from the Exat 51 group in Zagreb) appeared in Poland in 1957. Julian Przyboś, a close associate before the war of Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński, wrote an essay called “Abstract Art – How to Get Out”. Przyboś argued against the French-oriented informel style and one of its main Polish protagonists, Tadeusz Kantor, advocating instead attention to local artistic heritage, the Polish avant-garde tradition, namely constructivism. However, the first exhibition that manifest this was organized not in Poland, but in Paris, at Denis René Gallery in the same year: *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne*, 1957.

PARIS, AS NOTED, did indeed host a couple of exhibitions like that. The Zagreb artists from the Exat 51 group showed their work in *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles* – in fact, the same year the group was formed (1951). And allow me to mention the abstract Yugoslav art in 1959, and the work of the Hungarian constructivist László Kassák in 1960 and 1967, all shown at Denis René Gallery. It is hard to pinpoint the end of neoconstructivism in Eastern Europe, since even in the 1970s it was very popular throughout the region; however, its role changed around the end of the 1960s in the face of neo-avant-garde art: conceptual art, body art, performance, and other poetics.

Now, let me raise the final question: what is the art-historical significance for Old Continent of the popularity of neoconstructiv-

Endre Tót preferred performance to painting. Did he thereby free himself from Great Art?

ism, as well as a Parisian as opposed to North American geo-cultural trajectory, in Eastern Europe in the “Era of Pop,” i.e. in the 1960s?

The first and most general answer is quite banal: there was no one, monolithic Europe. Art history in Sweden in the 1960s, for example, was different from the art history in Yugoslavia. This also means that both virtual and real art geography looked different in different parts of Europe. If Sweden tended to focus on the North American art scene, Eastern Europe was – let us say – more “traditional” and viewed Paris as the eternal capital of culture with the capital “C.” Because it was cut off from its Western part, it petrified the old, continental, imagined cultural relations, which at the same time were symbolic, and compensated for the loss of the paradise that Europe without the Iron Curtain was thought to perhaps be. The next answer is not terribly sophisticated either. While pop culture was behind pop art, there was no pop culture in Eastern Europe in the 1960s, or at least not to the same extent as in the West, although pop music began gradually to become more and more widespread, but this started later in the 1960s. Nevertheless, it was more desirable than easily accessible, in some places maybe even elitist, rather than popular. Only later in the course of the 1960s did the situation change, but not to the same extent as in the US. To put it more metaphorically, Coca-Cola was still more expensive in the region – if it was accessible at all – than vodka In a word: it was not a “natural” background for pop art, even if we can find something, especially in Hungary and later in Estonia, resembling it in terms of style.

There is a deeper problem. Pop art acknowledged art with a small “a.” It wanted to be anti-elitist, immersed in everyday imaginary and street poetical art manifestation. However, art written with a lowercase “a” was suspect for Eastern Europeans. In addition, they needed art with a capital “A” as a manifestation of a defense of culture with a capital “C.” Even if they used everyday ordinary objects in their art production, they elevated them to the “Great Art”, and placed them in the symbolic, aesthetic, and poetic order. They felt that they had a mission to defend art, not to discredit it, since they knew that the latter was a goal of the power, the regime originating with the Soviets.

ALL OF THIS IS more or less obvious. I would like, however, to conclude with a different observation. Of course, as already noted, neither pop art nor neoconstructivism was democratic. While the former was populist, identifying equality with consumption – changing art galleries into commercial galleries, museums into shopping malls – the latter stood for technological utopia, and believed that technology would solve the problems of humanity, changing it into fabricated machinery, transforming existential issues into technocratic discourse. Both of them were criticized as such around 1968.

Neoconstructivism was of course not exclusively Eastern European. On the contrary – it was global, originating in Western so-to-speak rationalist, scientific, technocratic, and industrial utopian thought. Its functions were, however, different. While in the West it was connected with capitalism, in the East the same utopia supported communism. Here, thus, we touch upon the core problem. Was the popularity of neoconstructivism con-

nected with the reigning system of power? I would argue that in Yugoslavia and in Poland in particular, it was. The artists and the powers that be shared the same conviction that technology, science, and industrialization would be the right path forward. Additionally, neoconstructivist art did not appear dangerous – squares, circles, rectangular, straight lines, and so on were neutral and devoid of direct political meaning. Of course, the situation was dramatically different in such countries as the GDR, where socialist realism was mandatory in art in the 1960s, at least in the public sphere. In countries like the GDR, neoconstructivism manifested the desire for freedom, which also shows that in Eastern Europe there were inner borders, too. In both cases, i.e., a little bit more free, as well as a little bit less free communist countries, neoconstructivism manifested the desire to participate in the global art scene, to share the same universal culture, since these possibilities were limited – though of course to a lesser extent in Yugoslavia. I would stress that neoconstructivism gave the Eastern European artists a strong conviction that they are modern. To be modern made possible both a utopian prospect for the future, as well as references to the tradition of modernism from the past; and modernism, as I noted above, was the main framework of post-socialist-realist art in Eastern Europe. To put it simply: the problem with pop art would not be that it was modernist; indeed, it was anti-modernist, and as such would not address the typical Eastern European trauma experienced at that time of the discrediting of universal art by communist cultural politics. ✘

Note: Piotr Piotrowski held this lecture as a keynote talk at CBEEs’s annual conference at Södertörn University in December of 2014. He modified and reworked his lecture for publication in *Baltic Worlds*.¹¹

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- 6 *Ibid.*, 59–61.
- 7 *Ibid.*, respectively pp. 65, 111, 179.
- 8 Margit Rosen, “Editorial”, *ibid.*, 10–11.
- 9 Jerko Denegri, “The Conditions and Circumstances That Preceded the Mounting of the First Two New Tendencies Exhibitions in Zagreb 1961–1963”, *ibid.*, 20–21.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 11 The article will also appear in a coming anthology *Art in transfer, curatorial strategies in the Era of Pop*, Södertörn Studies in Art History and Aesthetics, ed. A. Öhrner (2016).