

Short Introduction on Applying the “Homonymic Curtain” to Recent Pop Art Exhibitions

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HOMONYMIC CURTAIN (POP ART EXAMPLE) 1960s		① FORMAL READING	② DIALOGUE	③ REVIVAL (CS-AFTER 1968)
QUESTIONS	WEST — EAST ART WORK	HOW SHOULD CONTEMPORARY ART LOOK LIKE?	HOW SHOULD CONTEMPORARY ART FUNCTION SOCIALLY?	HOW TO OUTWIT REQUIRED REALISM?
CRITIQUE CRITICAL METHOD	ORIGINAL CONTEXT PERFECT OTHER'S CONTEXT	FACT, THAT ARTISTS DECIDED TO DO SO, NOT TO DO SOC. REALISM	ANTITHESIS, INNER CRITICISM	CRITIQUE BETWEEN THE LINES OF HYPERREALISM REALISTICALLY DEPICTED UGLINESS
RESULT	HORIZONTAL MIRROR	PERIPHERAL POP	ORIGINS OF MEDAVANTSÁDE: eg. CONCEPT, PERFORMANCE, SITUATIONISM	HYPERREALISM IS REALISM, SO SOCIALIST REGIME COULDN'T PROHIBIT IT

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1 The Homonymic Curtain (diagram by the author)

In principal, my theory of “homonymic curtain” is a methodological draft of how to modify the view on the relations between Western and Eastern modernism during the Cold War. I suggest that the most general common denominator of the situation after World War II could be seen in an attempt to reconstruct what had been damaged by the war—the need for social and cultural recovery was the same among winners and losers. In addition, if we realize that the common tradition of European modernism and avant-

gardism did not disappear overnight in 1948, then the date of the beginning of the East/West divorce should at least be questioned. The borders would be closed for at least fifteen years, but the modern heritage resisted, especially after the post-Stalinist thaws that began in 1956.

In Central Europe we believe that the relationship between East and West was reconnected in the liberal atmosphere of the 1960s. In my opinion the recovery was limited to personal contacts between artists and art critics on the opposite sides of the Iron Curtain. But we must bear in mind that their worldviews have been very much under the influence of different developments since 1948. The new communication between them wasn't an example of consonance but rather a sign of complementarity, fed by their interest in new or similar forms. I can't consider this as the "return of the prodigal son," because artists in Czechoslovakia believed that it was possible to reform socialism. The goal of their work wasn't to revolt against the system, but to fundamentally change it. (In this interpretation we must acknowledge that the vulgarism of the 1950s was accepted as an evolutionary stage toward humanizing socialism.)

In my current thinking about the homonymic curtain I try to interpret the fact that similar or identical forms had different meanings on each side of the Iron Curtain. To describe the character of communication between West and East I suggest using the term "attempt at dialogue" rather than "dissemination." Hungarian art historian László Fehér suggests something similar: "adaptation" instead of "adopting" and "transfer" instead of "influence." Similarly, Piotr Piotrowski in the context of postwar India replaces

“appropriation” with “mediation.”

This attempt at dialogue, which contextualizes the homonymic curtain, has three circles (Fig. 1):

1. Formal reading—Confrontation of new Pop art aesthetics with actual alternative practices in the East, postcubism, postsurrealism, Art Informel, and so on. Through this “clash” the artists were experimenting with a new language, and almost immediately they started to produce different meanings. Pop art was probably the first artistic tendency with such ability.
2. Dialogue—Encounters with the aesthetics of American and British Pop art and French Nouveau Réalisme are responsible for the development of secondary practices in Central and Eastern Europe, for example, the onset of conceptual art, performance art, and also situationism. The motivation behind this could mainly be found in an attempt to define new social roles and possibilities for art in the then socialist society. This is a specific ambition we can consider to be a natural attribute of the Eastern neo-avant-garde in general.
3. Revival—The third circle can be seen in the revival of certain effects of the first and second practices, in how they also influenced official and semi-official realistic art, which was condoned by the socialist state. Pop art aesthetics has its culmination in hyperrealism, partially thanks to the new technique of airbrush, so even social realist painters started to embrace this style. This problem is not very much elaborated upon as yet.

All three circles of the homonymic curtain have their common denominator in the critical reactions of artists: toward political or artistic situations and also toward particular works of others. The attempt at dialogue was therefore not only present in a one-way version between East and West, but also in reciprocity among artists inside the closed society. That's why we can find a lot of antithesis in Slovak visual art between the 1960s and the 1980s, which openly or subconsciously reacted to the works of other artists.

In the first circle the gesture of resistance was the most important thing (a free decision to participate in the developments of Western art), whereas the second circle was already fueled with the attempt to answer some essential questions, being present for quite a while (maybe since 1956). The critical aspects of Pop art were welcomed, but in the East they were necessarily transformed, because to criticize consumerism in the gray socialist society of shortage would be absurd. In the third circle the criticism is present between the lines of socialist painting: hyperoptimistic images of so-called "real socialism" were totally false, because it was not possible to realistically depict something that physically did not exist—happy progressive socialism was only virtual.

Four exhibitions, *International POP*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2015; *The World Goes Pop*, Tate Modern, London, 2015; *Ludwig Goes Pop, The East Side Story*, Ludwig Museum, Budapest, 2015; and *East of Eden*, Ludwig Múzeum, Budapest, 2012, could serve as an interesting case study for this. They collected art from the peripheries of various worlds, mapping broadening transformations of Pop art. The result, of course, brings no unity, but the value stands in the presence of many parallel, mainly national,

narratives.

In my participation last year at the Modernist Studies Association Conference (Pasadena) I tried to apply this three-circle system to art shown in the above-mentioned exhibitions. I also tried to find some common attributes that might connect various art scenes, at least from Eastern Europe.

Nevertheless, my attempt to construct some unified reading, valid at least for Central Europe, is complicated by a great heterogeneity of national or multinational state histories inside the Eastern bloc. Our countries have interpreted socialism with different emphases on Soviet doctrines, post-Stalinistic thaws, and more or less liberal attempts to reform or humanize socialism, all of which were happening and failing at different times, due to the ups and downs of local politics. The dialogue I mention was constantly present, but its rules, rhythms, intensity, tools, possibilities for its actors, and potential for mutuality were very different in each country.

In these decades we have identified many internal and external connections, but they are very mutable (unstable), and hence hardly maintainable. It is obvious that a common narrative exists, but we are still on our way to defining it.