

After the Wall: Cultural Trauma and Methodological Challenges in Polish Art History

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An exhibition that concluded the first decade of the new geopolitical order in post-1989 Europe, a show entitled *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, curated by Bojana Pejić, David Elliot, and Iris Müller-Westermann at the Stockholm Moderna Museet in 1999, is the source of the title of this paper. The complexities and intricacies of the cultural transition in the former satellite countries of the Soviet Union have been also explored by Piotr Sztompka, a Polish sociologist who employed the term “cultural trauma” to analyze the condition of Polish society after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. It would be a commonplace to say that the 1989 turning point was culturally beneficial for the post-Communist countries, and yet, Sztompka argues that the aftermath period brought a belated aftershock to the social and cultural tissue. “There cannot be any doubt that the collapse of Communism was a traumatogenic change par excellence,” Sztompka assures us, naming the social disorder the “trauma of victory.”¹ He claims that the traumatizing process was due to the confrontation of two opposing cultures, i.e., the remnants of socialism and the consumerism of a predatory capitalism. As he explains, “Even when the spreading of alien culture is . . . peaceful, by virtue of economic strength, technological superiority or the psychological attractiveness of cultural products, flowing from the core toward the periphery, the result is often the break of cultural stability, continuity, and identity of indigenous groups, a milder and yet resented form of cultural trauma.”²

Hence the process of liberation, emancipation, and absorption of the Western type of globalization of society encapsulated a sense of cultural uncertainty and an inferiority

complex, and as such it affected the transformation of the domestic humanities, art history among others. The instant embrace and enthusiastic employment of feminism, psychoanalysis, neo-Marxism, hermeneutics, phenomenology, poststructuralism, deconstruction, and the “pictorial turn,” to mention just a few methodological models adopted from Western linguistics, anthropology, and philosophy, were accompanied by an acute critique of the domestic legacy of the discipline. The eagerness to catch up with Western idioms of theorizing historiography and the radical impetus to embark on a modernized track of research entailed a sharp revision of previously produced knowledge, the reevaluation being labelled as “polemical art history.” Actually, Polish post-1956 art history was neither simply factual nor narrowly nationalistic and retrograde (the French, Italian, German, and Russian connections were always meaningful). Hence the imitative implementation of Western methods in local art phenomena (in several cases implying a disregard for the idiosyncratic features of the researched material) appeared to be a kind of a self-blaming strategy and a symptom of what Alexander Kiossev described as a “self-colonization” attitude. “Self-colonizing cultures import alien values and models of civilization by themselves and . . . they lovingly colonize their own authenticity through foreign models,” claims Kiossev.³

A counterbalance to this tendency was provided by Piotr Piotrowski. Following Norman Bryson and Jonathan Culler, Piotrowski relied on “ramification” or contextualization of art phenomena in relation to the local cultural environment as a primary interpretative tool. In the framework of a new art geography, he conceived a theory of “horizontal art history” which conceptualizes the West as a region of historical importance equal to that of many other parts of the world, yet the most expansive one.⁴ Piotrowski aimed at deprioritizing Western art centers and at erasing the duality of the center-periphery relationship, ipso facto leveling the

hierarchical arrangement of cultures that depreciates the margins and giving primacy to the pluralism of cultural narratives.

Piotrowski postulated a deconstruction of Western cultural impact and an analysis of nonhierarchical functional terms, aiming to explain the local specificity and the process of hybridization of Western models and of producing some distinctive artistic amalgams. He also emphasized the necessity of recognition of local canons and axiological systems, and finally, he called for negotiation of diverse modern art formulae by comparing them. As a result, the “vertical” Euro-Atlantic model of art historiography should be replaced by a “horizontal” polyphonic art-historical discourse.

How does one rewrite art history in Eastern Europe, though, without constructing another “grand narrative,” as postulated by Piotrowski? How does one inscribe the region into the transnational perspective while analyzing particular cultural identities? Establishing a methodology adequate for inserting East European art production into cross-cultural trends was the key question at the international conference titled *East European Art Seen from Global Perspectives: Past and Present*, which was organized by Piotrowski in Lublin in 2014. What triggered the polemic was whether the revised historiographic paradigm should be based on comparing regional art canons or on tracing the mobility of artists and the circulation of visual motifs throughout the continents. Beáta Hock from the Leipzig Center for the History and Culture of East-Central Europe, for instance, outlined a program for constructing minor narratives focused on synchronous interconnections and exchange among artists active in the region. Such a dynamic model might prove instrumental in filling in numerous blank spots, extensive gaps, and untreated areas of art historiography. On the other hand, Hock’s proposal exemplifies a typically postmodernist attitude characterized by denial of the “master

discourse” and by prioritizing the “small” and the “soft.”⁵ The Lublin debate remained inconclusive, and equally unsettled seems to be the discussion about the relevance of postcolonial studies to the research of post-Communist cultures. Owing to chronological synchronization, Piotrowski saw an alternative path to the postcolonial critique, namely a posttotalitarian paradigm convergent with the South African postapartheid and the South American postauthoritarian perspective. Yet, regarding the basic differences between the political and geocultural characteristics of those regions his standpoint aroused a substantial controversy.

Another controversial issue in Polish post-Wall art history is how to delineate the historically unstable frontiers of the Eastern region of the Continent. After disestablishing the binary political system of the East-West, which thrived on the Continent till 1989, the question of what to call the region has been raised multiple times; should it be referred to as Central Europe, Eastern Europe, or East-Central Europe?

In order to pinpoint the historical fluctuations of concepts referring to the Eastern borders of Europe, it is worth recalling that the term “Central Europe” originally denoted the multinational and multiethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire, as well as a group of countries constituted as a result of the empire’s decline, which came along with the fall of the houses of the Hohenzollerns, Romanovs, and Ottomans.⁶ The literature began to be a site of new connotations of the term “Mitteleuropa,”⁷ first having a negative load, as it was the slogan of the expansionist pan-German ideology initiated in 1915 by Friedrich Naumann. The dispute over the signifieds of “Central Europe” has turned out to be a long-lasting phenomenon, and, so far, it seems to remain unresolved. Timothy Garton Ash, in his book *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe*, has listed as many as sixteen definitions of this region.⁸

As far as the conceptual category of “Eastern Europe” is concerned, as Larry Wolff has proven in his book *Inventing Eastern Europe*, the term has connoted, first and foremost, a political-economic construct of the Eastern bloc, embracing the satellite countries of the former Soviet Union.⁹ It is the Enlightenment ideology of the concept of the exotic East, situated far off the heart of Europe— that is, the West— that Wolff has perceived as the reason for the ultimate annihilation of Central European identity (self-recognition of Western Europe required an antithesis in the form of the East).

Defining the category of “East-Central Europe” seems even a greater challenge. Both the contour of this part of the Continent as well as the sociopolitical signified of this term have been subject to change, depending on the historical conditions and research aims.¹⁰ In the discourse of some scholars, the term “East-Central Europe” refers to the unrealized geopolitical conception of Intermarium, proclaimed by Józef Piłsudski: a plan for sustaining the security and position of new nation-states constituted after World War I in opposition to the imperial ambitions of Germany and Soviet Russia. Demarcated with the coastline of the Baltic Sea, the Adriatic Sea, and the Black Sea, the area was supposed to encompass Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Belarus, Ukraine, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia. Yet another point of reference for delineating the borders of East-Central Europe can be found in the contemporary literature on the theory of regional development, in accordance with which (in its minimalistic variant) it is assumed that this region encompasses ten post-Communist states, the new members of the European Union, which they entered on May 1, 2004 and January 1, 2007.¹¹ This part of the world is still perceived differently by political scientists, who search for identity-related characteristics of the region that bridges the East and the West.¹²

Even more consequential is the issue of the cultural uniqueness of East-Central Europe and its alleged collective identity. Has East-Central Europe been a site of developing distinct art codes? For some scholars the cultural cohesiveness of the region, despite its national, ethnic, and religious diversity, is a value of unquestionable primacy. In his article *The Phenomenon of Blurring*, Andrzej Turowski has listed the idiosyncratic characteristics of Central European art, concentrating on radical avant-garde movements.¹³ He has referred to the concept of Central Europe as a geocultural whole, proclaimed by Milan Kundera in his well-known article “The West Torn or the Tragedy of Central Europe,”¹⁴ a text which resonated in the dispute over the cultural identity of the region that intensified in the 1980s.¹⁵ Turowski has depicted the process of hybridization of the Western models as peculiar to Central Europe and described the procedures of synthesizing different, at times even opposing, poetics and stylistics in new art formulas. He unfolds a wide array of terms and notions, which originated in the eastern territories of the Continent and denominated local modernist trends emerging after World War I, to name but the most important: Formism, Unism, Activism, Poetism, Artificialism, Integralism, Hipnism, Cosmism, and Zenitism. But are cultural syncretism and the complex processes of acculturation and creolization characteristic only of Central Europe? Assuming a globalist perspective allows us to see that they are not, though the effects of such transfers, transpositions, and adaptations are different in different regions of the world. Moreover, for some political scientists,¹⁶ as well as literary and art historians, Central Europe does not exist as an entity to be objectively conceptualized. Kundera also captured the enigmatic character of Central Europe when pointing to its approximate location: east of the West and west of the East, as well as stressing that “its borders are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation.”¹⁷ Tomasz Gryglewicz,¹⁸ on his part, has treated Central Europe as an imaginary project, which does not have factual signifieds, a

space conceptualized in a geopolitical sense, an area deprived of stable, clearly outlined borders and of idiosyncratic features that could be easily captured. He has recognized, however, certain cultural characteristics which reflect the dramatic political history of the region. From the broadest perspective, it is possible to list here the national liberation tendencies which marked the nineteenth century, the mobilization to reconstitute nation-states after the Great War, the annihilation of a substantial portion of the population during World War II, the resistance against the communist system imposed in the Eastern bloc, and, finally, the efforts toward self-identification after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Gryglewicz sees the regional community only in the cultural sphere and mentions the pessimistic vision of the world resulting from the focus on destruction, disintegration, and disappearance processes as a specific element.

Some other researchers involved in the cultural mapping of Europe consider it justifiable to talk of art in East-Central Europe rather than of the idiosyncratic art of this region, due to the lack of homogeneity of the artistic phenomena and the distinct cultural traditions in different nation-states. Despite the all-abiding post-Yalta order, particular sociopolitical conditions in the member states of the Eastern bloc led to diversification of the artistic landscape, as Piotrowski has proven in his ground-breaking book, *Avant-Garde in the Shadow of Yalta: Art in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*.¹⁹ Hence, a final conclusion in the controversy over the common cultural core or a tessellation of cultures, bonded by the political history of the region, is still missing.

Thus, is the plurality and simultaneity of narratives based on complementary, divergent, or conflicting methodological tenets in postmodernist art history a sign of rebirth and reconstruction of the discipline? I do support the concept of a polyphonic art history. Yet I

think that a kind of metanarrative²⁰ (free from the principle of Euro-Atlantic cultural hegemony) would reinforce the integrity of the discipline as much as the avoidance of ideological manipulation and of a post-truth approach to its essentials, i.e. the historical exploration.

Notes

¹ Piotr Sztompka, “The Trauma of Social Change: A Case of Postcommunist Societies,” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 172.

² Sztompka, 172.

³ Alexander Kiossev, “Notes on Self-Colonizing Cultures,” in *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, exh. cat., ed. Bojana Pejić and David Elliott (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999), 114.

⁴ Piotr Piotrowski, “On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History,” *Umění* 5 (2008): 378–83; idem., “How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?,” *Third Text* 96 (2009): 5–14; idem., “Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde,” in *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, ed. Sasha Bru, Jan Baetens, and Benedikt Hjartarson (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 49–58.

⁵ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 1991.

⁶ Elizabeth Clegg, *Art, Design, and Architecture in Central Europe 1890–1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁷ Krisztina Passuth, ed., *Mittleuropa: Kunst, Regionen, Beziehungen*, colloquium proceedings, Budapest, April 28–29, 1994 (Budapest: Eötvös Loránd Tud, 1995).

⁸ Timothy Garton Ash, *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe* (New York: Random House, 1989).

⁹ Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Waldemar Paruch and Krystyna Trembicka, *Wspólnota czy rozbieżność doświadczeń: O historycznych zewnętrznych uwarunkowaniach przebudowy w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej po 1989 roku* [Community or divergence of experiences: On historical outer determinants of the post-1989 East-Central Europe reconstruction], in *Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia. Region, państwa i społeczeństwa w czasie transformacji* [East-Central Europe: Region, states and societies in the period of transformation], ed. Julia Agnieszka Rybczyńska (Lublin: Maria Skłodowska-Curie University Press, 2000), 12.

¹¹ Wojciech Kosiedowski, *Regiony Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w procesie integracji: Ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem wschodniego pogranicza Unii Europejskiej* [The East-Central European regions in the process of integration, the Eastern Borderlands in particular] (Toruń, Poland: Nicolaus Copernicus University Press, 2008), 13. Pointing to the ambiguity of the term “East-Central Europe,” the author highlights that present-day economic-regional

literature—both worldwide and in Poland—is less interested in the issues of formal delimitation, and more in the idea of the so-called “open region” (idem., *Regiony Europy*, 22).

¹² Piotr Mazurkiewicz, *Oddychać dwoma płucami: Tożsamość Europy Środkowej* [Breathing with both lungs: The identity of Central Europe], in *Europa Środkowa: Wspólnota czy zbiorowość?* [Central Europe: A union or a collective?], ed. Radosław Zenderowski (Wrocław, Poland: Ossoliński Press, 2004), 71–75.

¹³ Andrzej Turowski, “The Phenomenon of Blurring,” in *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930*, ex. cat., Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Martin-Gropius-Bau, ed. Timothy O. Benson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2002), 362–73.

¹⁴ Milan Kundera, “Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l’Europe Centrale,” *Le débat* 27 (1983): 3–22.

¹⁵ Jan Bakoš has pointed out that the concept of Central or East-Central Europe understood as a discrete historical and cultural area began to take shape as early as the 1960s. See Jan Bakoš, *Ścieżki i strategie historiografii sztuki w Europie Środkowej* [Paths and strategies of art history in Central Europe], *Artium Quaestiones* 24 (2013): 255–306.

¹⁶ Radosław Zenderowski points out that the concept of Middle Europe is ambiguous and controversial to such an extent that it may lead to presupposing that it does not exist as an integral and objectively verifiable social, cultural, historical, or geographical fact (Radosław Zenderowski, “Europa Środkowa jako „ucieczka przed Wschodem” czy „pomost” między Wschodem i Zachodem?” [Central Europe “as escape from the East” or a “bridge” between the East and the West?], in *Europa Środkowa: wspólnota czy zbiorowość?* [Central Europe: A union or a collective?], ed. Zenderowski (Wrocław, Poland: Ossolineum Press), 36.

¹⁷ Kundera, “Un Occident kidnappé, 3.

¹⁸ Tomasz Gryglewicz, “Ideology or Culture: On the Art of a Non-Existing Central Europe at the Time of the Avant-Garde and the Yalta Conference,” in *Local Strategies, International Ambitions: Modern Art and Central Europe 1918–1968*, papers from the International Conference, Prague, June 11–14, 2003, ed. Vojtěch Lahoda (Prague: Artefactum, 2006), 237–43.

¹⁹ Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe 1945–1989* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009).

²⁰ Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity—An Incomplete Project,” in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 3–15.