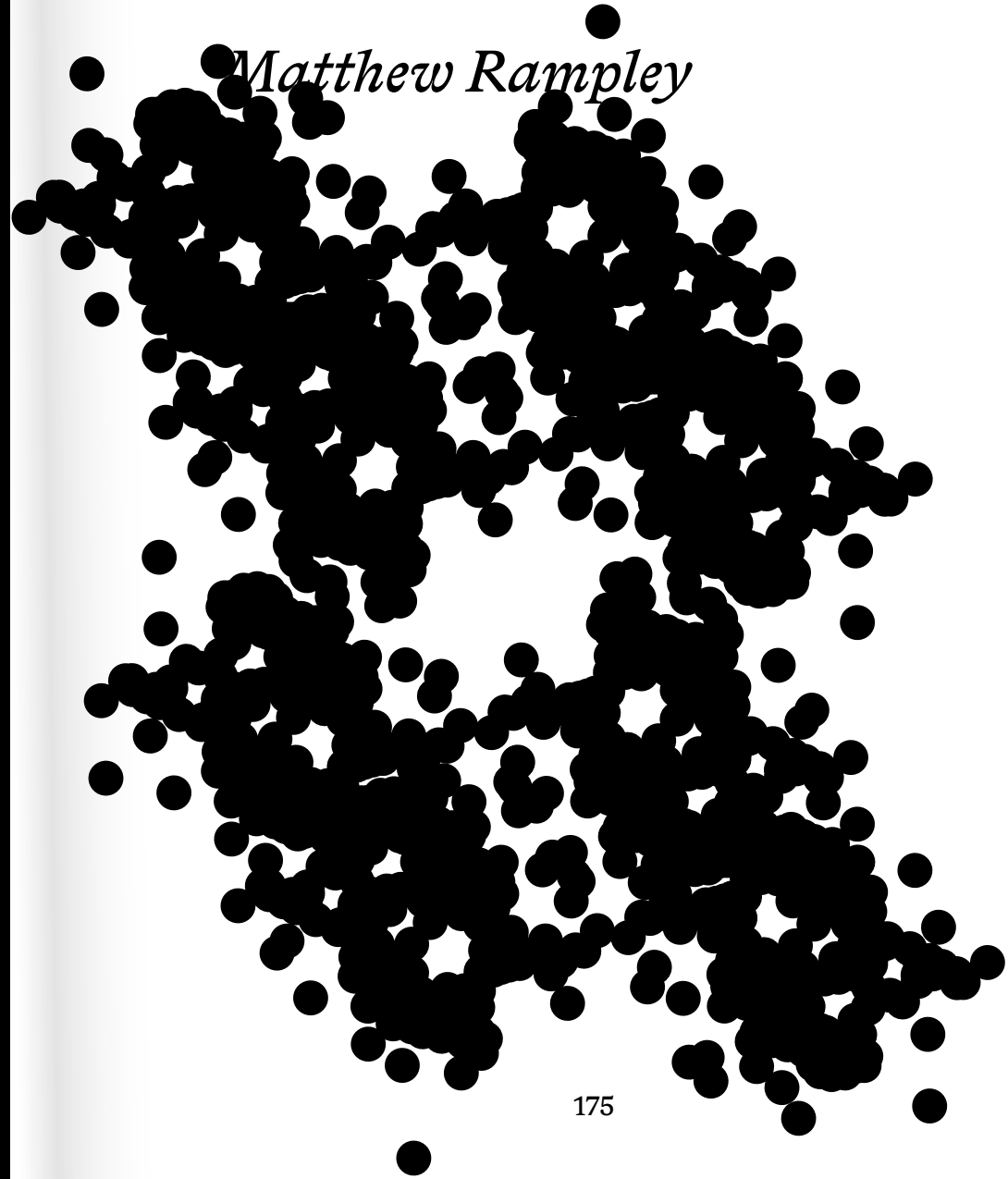


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# The Search for Alternatives: Horizontal Art History, 15 Years Later

*Matthew Rampley*



In 1931, Bedřich Hrozný, decipherer of Hittite and one of the founders of the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, became entangled in an argument with Antonín Frinta, a docent of comparative Slavic philology at Charles University over issues of language. The journal of the Institute, *Archiv orientální*, had just begun to be published, and Frinta criticised it for the fact that the languages of the journal were only French, German and English. Specifically, he called for it to include articles in Czech and Russian. Hrozný's answer was emphatic: neither language (and he added Italian to the list, too) was a language of world science. Publishing articles in Russian, Czech or Italian would restrict the readership of the journal, since many would not be able to understand them.<sup>(1)</sup> Consequently, if the Institute and its journal wished to be a recognised participant in the world of international scholarship, German, French and English would be the only languages of publication. Apart from a brief editorial in Czech celebrating liberation from Nazi rule, this remained the policy until 1947, when articles in Italian and Russian appeared for the first time.<sup>(2)</sup>

Hrozný may have been correct, but his reasoning laid bare the extent to which academic research was (and continues to be) enmeshed in larger questions of power. Scholarship on the ancient languages and cultures of western Asia had long been dominated by the great European states: France, Britain, and, until 1918, Germany and Austria-Hungary. It was also intertwined with their colonial interests, as Edward Said pointed out over forty years

1 Bedřich HROZNÝ, "O jazyku naší jediné orientální revue," in: Šárka VELHARTICKÁ (ed.), *Bedřich Hrozný: texty a přednášky. Archeologické expedice a lingvistické objevy předního českého orientalisty*, Prague: Academia 2022, pp. 370–73.

2 Vincenc LESNÝ, "Opět svobodni," *Archiv orientální*, Vol. 15, 1946, No. 3–4, p. 196.

ago.<sup>(3)</sup> Hrozný's reply to Frinta was thus an act of acquiescence to the *Realpolitik* of the day, accepting the hegemonic status of the languages of the major European and global imperiums. This episode of nearly a century ago may at first sight seem to have little to do with the historiography of modernism, except that it illustrates precisely the problem Piotr Piotrowski outlined in his call for a horizontal art history in the present.<sup>(4)</sup> In the fifteen years since it was published, Piotrowski's essay has taken on an almost canonical status, yet the critical landscape has also changed in the intervening period. The remainder of this article offers some reflections on the fate of his essay and his ideas in the light of that fact.

### *Art History, Modernism and the North Atlantic*

As with the study of the ancient world of western Asia, so, too, the discipline of art history is shaped by wider geopolitical forces. The art historian from East-Central Europe, Piotrowski pointed out, is all too conscious that they are working in a field where the parameters have been determined elsewhere. It is a syndrome that many others, too, have pointed out. James Elkins, for example, has highlighted the continuing global dominance of "North Atlantic" art criticism and theory.<sup>(5)</sup> By this he means a mode of anglophone writing developed in North American universities in the last quarter of the twentieth century, drawing on (usually French) post-structuralist theory, which it treats as

3 Edward SAID, *Orientalismus. Západní koncepce Orientu*, Prague: Paseka 2008 / *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books 1978. See, too, Suzanne Marchand's more recent study of German and Austrian Oriental studies: *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race and Scholarship*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010.

4 Piotr PIOTROWSKI, "On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History," *Umění*, Vol. 56, 2008, No. 5, pp. 378–83.

5 James ELKINS, *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing*, Berlin – Boston: de Gruyter 2021.

a universal discourse of evaluation and interpretation. *Art Since 1900*, the book that prompted Piotrowski's article on horizontal art history, is a perfect exemplar of this phenomenon. Its authors, through the undeniable brilliance of their writings since the 1970s in the journal *October* and in their various monograph publications, have managed to shape the field of art history in massive ways.<sup>(6)</sup> The combination of semiological analysis, Lacanian theory, Marxist and post-Marxist history has taken on a canonical status in the discipline. Subsequent initiatives, in which other approaches such as the rhizomatic work on affect by Deleuze, Judith Butler's inquiry into performativity and gender, Bruno Latour's actor-network theory and the political aesthetics of Jacques Rancière have been taken up, have done little to change this picture. They are merely variations on the same theme. Indeed, the irony is that in posing the very question of hegemony in art historical writing, Piotrowski was himself working within and contributing to that discourse.

Piotrowski is best known internationally for his writings on art in socialist and post-socialist East-Central Europe.<sup>(7)</sup> They have been widely translated and remain the most important studies of their kind, in terms of their breadth, depth and the sophistication. However, his article on horizontal art history was particularly concerned with the beginning of the twentieth century, and he identified the ways in which the map of the avant-gardes is skewed; Paris, Berlin, New York and Moscow still tend to dominate discussion. Modernist artists from elsewhere in Europe were "allocated" a certain role, even when the map of art history was expanded to include, for example, Brno, Belgrade, Cracow or Kecskemét. Drawing on a familiar critique from more

6 Hal FOSTER – Benjamin BUCHLOH – Rosalind KRAUSS – Yves-Alain BOIS, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, London: Thames & Hudson 2016.

7 Piotr PIOTROWSKI, *Awangarda w cieniu Jałty: Sztuka i polityka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej 1945–1989*, Poznań: Rebis 2005; Piotr PIOTROWSKI, *Agorafilia: Sztuka i demokracja w postkomunistycznej Europie*, Poznań: Rebis 2010.

general postcolonial theories, he pointed out that where one sees the history of modernism and the avant-garde in Paris as *universal* phenomena, one sees in Prague the history of "Czech" modernism. This asymmetry shaped, too, the interpretative lens through which the work of individual artists was interpreted. Artists such as Picasso, Kirchner and Tatlin (and I deliberately choose male figures here) were deemed to be exploring questions of *general* significance to do with representation, sexuality and materiality, for example, whereas the likes of Kubišta, Czóbel and Goryńska were viewed as engaging with specifically *local* concerns. This universal/local duality is reflected, too, in the division of art historical labour. When art historians from East-Central Europe make an appearance on the international terrain of art history, it is as "local" experts, not as authors of a set of views of wider resonance and significance.

This problem he identified was the variant of a wider issue that could be seen in, for example, literary studies. As the Indian critic Sumana Roy has recently stated, "...the white writer could write about anything. The expectation of the non-white writers was different. They were to be tour guides to their cultures, burdened with satisfying the intellectual curiosity of the white world."<sup>(8)</sup> Or to cite another Indian critic:

The important European novelist makes innovations in the form; the important Indian novelist writes about India. This is a generalization, and not one that I believe. But it represents an unexpressed attitude that governs some of the ways we think of literature today.<sup>(9)</sup>

8 Sumana ROY, "The Problem with the Postcolonial Syllabus," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10 February 2021.

9 Amit CHAUDHURI, "I am Ramu," *n + 1*, 22 August 2017.

It is a problem that has long determined, too, the place that women and minorities traditionally occupy in the critical landscape. The expectation is that their work will be about their specific identitarian questions.

Many of Piotrowski's observations retain their pertinence a decade and a half after his essay, and for the depressing reason that limited progress appears to have been made. While there have been some notable attempts to create an alternative geography of modernism in East-Central Europe, it still seems difficult to evade the symbolic dominance of art historical narratives formed elsewhere.<sup>(10)</sup> The reasons for this are not always straightforward and, consequently, nor are the solutions.

They relate not merely to object choice but also to questions of methodology and conceptual framing. Elkins identifies an important failing in current art history, criticism and theory: the fact that methods and approaches from outside of the "North Atlantic" canon, indeed, from outside of the paradigms of European art history, are little known, except as anthropological-cultural artefacts. Experts in Chinese, Indian or Islamic art, for example, are hired by western universities, but using western (for reasons I outline below, I prefer the term "North Atlantic") methods of art historical analysis. Conversely, specialists in, for example Chinese or Indian art are not employed for their expertise in Indian or Chinese interpretative methods. As he noted in his introductory discussion of this problem nearly twenty years ago, *Stories of Art*, while there are many alternative discourses of art, their terms of reference are so distinct and incommensurable as to be unrecognisable as art historical at all.<sup>(11)</sup>

Piotrowski was concerned with rewriting the history of the avant-gardes in East-Central Europe (and more

generally) but, paradoxically, the way he posed the issue provided a vivid illustration of the problem he was trying to address. Many art historians working on the twentieth century in East-Central Europe still seem mesmerised by the idea of the avant-garde, Piotrowski included. Indeed, the presence of an avant-garde continues to function as an instrument of national cultural *legitimation*. In the Czech Republic, for example, the semi-permanent display on "The First Republic" in the National Gallery has very little to say about artistic practices that do not fall into the categories of "modern" or "avant-garde." And for obvious reasons; attention to the interwar avant-gardes has long served as a proxy measure of legitimation of the wider achievements of the First Czechoslovak Republic. Yet, the idea of the "avant-garde" was first used in relation to artistic politics in 1820s France as a rallying point of resistance to the Bourbon Restoration in France.<sup>(12)</sup> In other words, it was a local invention that has taken on a wider symbolic role, especially in East-Central Europe. Indeed, its use as a vehicle of approbation has often eclipsed meaningful analysis; in the flurry of publications in recent years on the avant-gardes of Central and Eastern Europe, the terms "modernism" and "avant-garde" are used interchangeably, despite the fact that serious attempts have been made to articulate analytical distinctions between them. It may, of course, be that reliance on the term is apt, but its continued prevalence, often in relation to artistic practices that supposedly embodied a new-found autonomy in the cultures of East-Central Europe, ironically seems to confirm the hegemonic role of Paris as the standard by which other artistic cultures are judged.

10 See, for example, Marie RAKUŠANOVÁ, *Bohumil Kubišta a Evropa*, Prague: Karolinum 2020; Karel SRP, *Rozlomená doba 1908–1928: avant-gardy ve střední Evropě*, Olomouc: Arbor Vitae 2018.

11 James ELKINS, *Stories of Art*, Chicago: Chicago University Press 2005.

12 Paul WOOD, "Modernism and the Idea of the Avant-Garde," in: Paul SMITH – Carolyn WILDE (eds.), *A Companion to Art Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell 2002, pp. 215–28.

*Everyone is Peripheral*

In his outline of the meaning of decolonial analysis, published shortly before Piotrowski's article appeared, Walter Mignolo spoke of the importance of "epistemic disobedience," in other words, the refusal to accept existing categories and concepts of analysis.<sup>(13)</sup> The ubiquitous use of "avant-garde" shows how difficult such disobedience is, and it is a sign of its hold on the art historical imagination. It is a particularly acute problem in East-Central Europe, and it relates to Piotrowski's comments on "representationalism." By this "representationalism" I mean the fact that many art historians as well as artists and architects of East-Central Europe still assume the role of local representatives of their national culture.

It is a particularly acute problem in a country such as the Czech Republic because, in contrast to China, for example, there is no indigenous set of interpretative methods or aesthetic concepts that could challenge the dominance of "North Atlantic" discourse. Or rather, the alternative is positivism, in which art historical research is equated with the excavation of archival material and information that is understood to be awaiting discovery. It is a long art historical tradition that can be traced back to the 1860s, and it continues to the present. The reasons for its persistence are numerous; not only is it a reflex, perhaps, of old Vienna School practices, it was also a politically safe option for art historians under socialist rule. However, it comes at a cost. For, by definition, it relegates the art historian of East-Central Europe to the status of local expert, to the guardian of facts and knowledge. The lack of methodological and conceptual renewal in Czech art history consequently means that "North Atlantic" art history provides the major resource for scholars

13 Walter D. MIGNOLO, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom," *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 26, 2009, No. 7–8, pp. 159–81. See, too, "Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option: A Manifesto," *Transmodernity*, Vol. 1, 2011, No. 2, pp. 44–66.

seeking interpretative innovation. This has come with certain frictions, too; personal experience has indicated how in some quarters this can be perceived as a kind of cultural and intellectual colonialism. The difficulty facing the holders of such views is that traditions of positivistic scholarship offer a poor basis for resistance to its dominance.

Piotrowski's observation on insularity, noting that Poles know nothing about Romanian art, and that Czechs know very little about Ukrainian art is still accurate (even though recent events have ensured that the latter example is less absolute than it once was).<sup>(14)</sup> Yet his observations have to be tempered here, too, in part because they gloss over the complexities of the phenomenon. In fact, the insularity to which Piotrowski referred is unevenly distributed, temporally and spatially. If we focus on the Czech example, we can remind ourselves that important past scholars, such as Zdeněk Wirth, Vojtěch Birnbaum and Vincenc Kramář, established their reputations as much on their writings about French and Italian art as on anything they wrote about Czech art. The same can be said of their counterparts elsewhere; Marian Sokołowski (1839–1911) in Cracow or Gyula Pasteiner (1846–1924) in Budapest, to name just two notable examples, wrote extensively on topics other than Polish and Hungarian art. Several decades of socialist rule (as well as the nationalism of the 1930s and Nazi occupation) interrupted this culture.<sup>(15)</sup> Yet it never entirely disappeared in Poland; it is perhaps not a coincidence that it should be Piotrowski who should come to wider international attention, for he was the heir to a longer tradition of international engagement on the part of Polish scholars, of whom Jan Białostocki is perhaps the best known example. Thirty years after the end of socialism, it appears to have been hard to shake off this legacy in some places. Czech art historians still largely focus on Czech art, fulfilling

14 PIOTROWSKI, "Towards a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Gardes," p. 57.  
15 Milena BARTLOVÁ, *Dějiny českých dějin umění, 1945–1969*, Prague: UMPRUM 2020.

in one more way the role of “local” expert. There are, of course, some exceptions, although studies by Czech authors of art outside of the Czech Republic are vanishingly rare. Curiously, the almost exclusive focus on national art is not paralleled in other disciplines in the Czech Republic, such as history, for example, where there is a lively interest in global history. This suggests that while the conditions of peripherality identified by Piotrowski are important, other local cultural factors play a role, as well as the institutionalised disciplinary practices and traditions of Czech art history.

Other aspects of Piotrowski’s essay demand some kind of interrogation. One important reason is that the critical climate has changed, but another is that the thematics of centre and periphery, “West” and “East” are themselves fraught with difficulty when it comes to identifying where they are to be found. For Piotrowski it may have seemed obvious where the centre was. It was located in the “West,” and the target of his criticism was “Western” art history. Of course, it is hardly original to point out that the essentializing division into “West” and “East” is where the problem starts. In addition, it is not so straightforward to identify where the “West” really is. Counter-intuitively, an illuminating example could be Britain. On the one hand, it is undoubtedly a central locus of western geopolitical power and influence. Equally, many scholars of British origin, including the current author, are exponents of “North Atlantic” art historical discourse. Yet when it comes to the history of modernism and the avant-gardes, Britain has often been as peripheral as Czechoslovakia, Hungary or Poland. This is despite the massive international importance of the galleries and art museums of London.

As I am reminded whenever I discuss the topic with students in Brno, Britain can hardly be said to be central to the story of modern art. Artists such as Henry Moore or Barbara Hepworth occupy a distant place on their horizons. Others, ranging from Walter Sickert and Eduardo Paolozzi to Leonora Carrington, Wilhelmina Barns-Graham and Peter Lanyon, remain provincial figures who are mostly

unknown outside of Britain. Their work, too, is often viewed through the lens of localism; the 1950s abstract landscapes of Lanyon, for example, are mostly seen as exemplars of a specifically English romantic pastoralism, in contrast to the “universal” meanings of similar paintings by his contemporary counterparts in the United States. In *Art Since 1900* British artists play a minor role, too. In the most recent edition, published in 2016, Britain first appears in the entry for the year 1956, with the exhibition *This is Tomorrow*, staged by the Independent Group in London. The next appearance is in 1975, date of the publication of Laura Mulvey’s essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. The conceptual artist and photography theorist Victor Burgin is then mentioned in 1984 and then, towards the end of the book, there is a flurry of references to British artists, beginning with Damien Hirst in 2007.<sup>(16)</sup>

Such rare appearances give a clear insight on the historiographic gaze of the authors of the book, which is decidedly not directed towards Britain in any substantial way. It is also mirrored in Britain itself, where, until the 1990s, British – by which I really mean “English” – modernism was seldom taken seriously as a topic by art historians.<sup>(17)</sup> It was seen as just too provincial. Ambitious historians of modernism would instead turn their attentions to France or the United States (even Germany was a relatively undiscovered country), where greater professional recognition would be gained, such as the relative lack of significance attached to the modernist art of Britain. A similar observation can

16 FOSTER – BUCHLOH – KRAUSS – BOIS, *Art Since 1900*, pp. 447, 654, 692, 796, 824, 836.

17 Scotland, Wales and Ireland occupy the same place in the English art historical imaginary as Slovakia in the Czech. They are acknowledged as existing, but are treated as a semi-exotic adornment, and are generally either ignored or subsumed under the umbrella term of “British art.” William Vaughan’s criticism of the conflation of “English” and “British” is no less relevant now than when first published. See William VAUGHAN, “The Englishness of British Art,” *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 13, 1990, No. 2, pp. 11–23. For example Scottish and Welsh art are markedly absent in the journal *British Art Studies*, launched in 2015 by the Yale Centre for British Art.

be made of France where, as Ralph Dekoninck and Joël Roucloux have argued, French art historians have long been haunted by an inferiority complex with regard to their British and, especially, American peers.<sup>(18)</sup> Austrian and German art historians increasingly write in English, and while there have been attempts to coin new methods and concepts in Germany, “Bildwissenschaft” being a prominent example, the conceptual and methodological lexicon of German-language art history is now dominated by terms borrowed from English.

In a clear sense, therefore, “North Atlantic” art history is the discourse of the Ivy League and other prestigious universities of the Northeastern United States, except that many American art historians see *themselves* as being on the periphery, envious of the cultural status of Europe, even if it long ceased to be the centre of financial and political power. As a ubiquitous discourse that has become unmoored from its origins and a powerful vehicle of the critique of the very asymmetries it embodies, “North Atlantic” art history would seem to bear out the contention of another French theorist, Michael Foucault, that power is everywhere, and that since it *produces* subjects, a general perception and misapprehension operates that the holders of power are always *somewhere else*.<sup>(19)</sup> Alternatively, perhaps, it may simply reaffirm the familiar point that those in the centre are usually least aware of their own hegemonic position. To adapt a term from social theory, the centre is a normative “unmarked space,” and it is only the peripheries that are marked as such.<sup>(20)</sup>

- 18 Ralph DEKONINCK – Joël ROUCLoux, “Art History in France: a Conflict of Traditions,” in: Matthew RAMPLEY – Thierry LENAIN – Hubert LOCHER – Andrea PINOTTI – Charlotte SCHOELL-GLASS – Kitty ZIJLMANS (eds.), *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe: Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, Leiden: Brill 2012, pp. 315–334.
- 19 Michel FOUCAULT, *Dějiny sexuality I: Vůle k věděni*, Prague: Herrmann a synové 1999 / *Histoire de la sexualité. La volonté de savoir*, Paris: Gallimard 1976.
- 20 Wayne BREKHUS, “A Sociology of the Unmarked: Redirecting our Focus,” *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 16, 1998, No. 1, pp. 34–51.

### Global Considerations

Such considerations also demand a questioning of the terms of Piotrowski’s argument, however. For even if the Romanian or Czech art historian may be highly conscious of their peripheral status, when viewed in a global context, this may be because they, too, are beset by misrecognition of their position. East-Central Europe may be rather more “central” than the rhetoric of East and West might suggest. We can approach this issue by considering the experiences of one of Hrozný’s contemporaries: Emanuel Rádl.

In 1922 Rádl participated in a world Christian student conference in Beijing. He used his attendance there as an opportunity to travel more widely around Asia, visiting, for the first time in his life, India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Japan and Mongolia. Three years later, he published a book, *Západ a Východ (West and East)*, in which he made a serious attempt to reflect on his experiences and their significance for Czechoslovakia.<sup>(21)</sup> The book contains many clichés about Asia and Asian “spirituality,” but it also contains serious discussion of different religions, the place of Christianity in Asian countries, social values and practices, the rise of nationalism and other modern developments. It contains some striking observations, too. Rádl noted the insignificance of Czechoslovakia as a “Liliputian” state when set against the vast size of China. Second, he noted that in China and elsewhere in Asia, the idea of being Czech or Czechoslovak had little meaning; instead, he was told by one local host, a regional governor in China, that he and other compatriots were simply regarded as “European.”<sup>(22)</sup> On the one hand this was perhaps a welcome endorsement of the fact that Czechs, too, were true “Europeans,” but, equally, it meant that it was not possible to enter into a special plea to be treated differently from other, colonial,

- 21 Emanuel RÁDL, *Západ a Východ*, Praha: Jan Laichter 1925.
- 22 RÁDL, *Západ a Východ*, p. 13.

Europeans. What Filip Herza has referred to as the myth of colonial innocence was dispelled by this comment.<sup>(23)</sup> This uncomfortable observation helps to cast a critical light on what has become a growing view, namely, that as global artistic and cultural networks have come ever more into focus, East-Central Europe occupied a distinct place that differed from that of the West.

A recent conference held in March 2023 in Poznań by the Piotrowski Center for Research on East-Central European Art illustrates this phenomenon all too clearly. Under the title “Equal and Poor,” it sought to identify anti-colonial artistic networks and parallels between communist East-Central Europe and the global South, in order to reveal “to what extent artistic connections and collaborations were/could be inscribed in the processes of epistemic delinking (*desprendrerse*), which, as argued by Walter Mignolo, questions both the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of the coloniality of power, present in American relations with Europe.”<sup>(24)</sup> This is an important initiative, and it represents a welcome extension to the utopian impulse of the call for a horizontal art history. Piotrowski’s immediate concern was the position of East-Central Europe *within* Europe, yet addressing the global stage entails the same logic. It is symptomatic of this that the call for papers of the conference also made reference to the work of the Argentine art historian, Andrea Giunta, whose recent book *Against the Canon*, offered a history of post-war Mexican, Argentinian and Brazilian modernism “without a centre,” replacing the logic of centre and periphery with that of “simultaneous avant-gardes.”<sup>(25)</sup>

- 23 Filip HERZA, “Colonial Exceptionalism: Post-Colonial Scholarship and Race in Czech and Slovak Historiography,” *Slovenský národopis*, Vol. 68, 2020, No. 2, pp. 175–187.
- 24 Magdalena RADOMSKA, “Art in Communist Europe and the Global South: Call for Papers,” <https://arthist.net/archive/37858> (accessed 3 May 2023).
- 25 Andrea GIUNTA, *Contra el Canon: El arte latinoamericano en un mundo sin centro*, Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores 2020.

There are nevertheless numerous potential pitfalls in this stance. For the idea of “Equal and Poor” imagines an idealized and privileged place for East-Central European cultures and peoples, as the “good Europeans.” This was certainly in keeping with the official rhetoric of the socialist states, yet there is a danger in taking it at face value. As the experience of Rádl demonstrated, for many outside Europe, questions of European nationality were irrelevant, and the attempt to distinguish between “good” and “bad” Europeans on this basis was an exercise in wishful thinking. A new exhibition at the National Museum in Prague on the legacy of Emil Holub undertakes, for the first time, a critical assessment of his activities, including his theft of rock art from southern Africa, and makes all too clear that Czechs were hardly exceptional when it came to taking advantage of their elevated position in a hierarchy of colonial power simply by virtue of being white Europeans.<sup>(26)</sup> The Holub exhibition is just the first step in a long overdue process of critical assessment that would extend far beyond the case of Czechs.<sup>(27)</sup>

Despite its admirable intentions, therefore, the programme “Equal and Poor” runs the risk of repeating the myth of exceptionalism. Indeed, a growing body of work on global socialism has also begun to undermine claims about the anti-colonial policies of the socialist states of East-Central Europe. The historian James Mark has pointed out that as early as the Bandung Conference of 1955 participants were complaining that Soviet Bloc states were no less exploitative in their attitude towards the “Third World” than the United States and the former European Colonial powers.<sup>(28)</sup> Moreover, he claims further, the sense that the

- 26 Tomáš WINTER, *Emil Holub*, Prague: National Museum 2023.
- 27 See, for example, Sarah LEMMEN, *Tschechen auf Reisen: Repräsentationen der außereuropäischen Welt und nationale Identität in Ostmitteleuropa 1890–1938*, Köln: Böhlau 2018.
- 28 James MARK et al., 1989: *A Global History of Eastern Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019.



peoples of East-Central Europe, lacking their own colonies, were “not quite white,” meant that the nationalisms of the region often identified all the more with imperial Europe. Czech, Hungarian and Polish colonial fantasies proliferated, too, in the early twentieth century. The anti-colonial solidarity that was promoted by the socialist governments from the 1950s onwards requires an equally critical eye, for, Mark claims, it “offered a gateway to status and enabled the claim that [East Europeans] were in fact the better white Europeans on account of their commitment to anti-racism.”<sup>(29)</sup> It was thus seen in instrumental terms; even individuals could be weaponised in the ideological conflict of the Cold War, as Františka Schormová has recently suggested in relation to the reception of Paul Robeson in socialist Czechoslovakia.<sup>(30)</sup>

### *Future Horizons*

Piotrowski was all too aware of the parallels between his call for a horizontal art history and the project of decolonization, and while the recent engagement with global histories of East-Central Europe is an important extension to his original project, it has also turned out to be a double-edged sword, for it challenges the frame of reference that provided the impetus for his original intervention. Since his essay was first published, much has changed in the political climate, and not necessarily for the better. In a recent reflection on his essay, Edit András has pointed out how easily the critique of the hegemony of the “West” and the argument for the historical specificities of the culture of East-Central Europe can turn into neo-nationalist

29 James MARK et al., *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonization*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2022, p. 254.

30 Františka SCHORMOVÁ, “Stalinův černý apoštol: Afroamerický zpěvák Paul Robeson v Československu,” *Soudobé dějiny*, Vol. 28, 2021, No. 1, pp. 183–213.

*ressentiment*.<sup>(31)</sup> Criticisms of “North Atlantic” art history can also fall into this trap.

A similar point has been made by Blake Stimson in a recent provocative editorial for the journal *non-site*: “Any concept can be hollowed out and repurposed for opposite ends in the same way that anti-colonialism’s crowbar of cultural difference has been turned into neo-colonialism’s sledgehammer of political and economic exploitation.”<sup>(32)</sup> Piotrowski’s critical references to “Western” art history read uncomfortably now, given that “the West” has been the target of the chauvinistic rhetoric of governments ranging from Viktor Orbán to Vladimir Putin, in the name of “alternative” cultural and civilisational values. We can deplore their cynicism, but it highlights the pertinence of Stimson’s point. Moreover, there is a more substantial argument behind his comment. He suggests that the problem lies not merely in the fact that there is an uncanny parallel between neo-nationalist rhetoric and talk of cultural difference. In addition, recognition of cultural difference, emphasis on diversification and incommensurability, was itself a tool of neo-colonialism adopted by the United States as it took over the place of the former European colonial powers. Attacked by Kwame Nkrumah as a form of “balkanisation,” its value lay, Stimson argues, in the fact that it impeded wider projects of solidarity and therefore underpinned the exercise of a “spectral” indirect colonial rule.<sup>(33)</sup>

Edit András expressed a deep concern that the project of a horizontal art history was being squeezed between the neo-nationalist discourse of “difference” and the reassertion of a kind of universalism, and that the latter was

31 Edit ANDRÁS, “Horizontal Art History: Endangered Species,” in: Agata JAKUBOWSKA – Magdalena RADOMSKA (eds.), *Horizontal Art History and Beyond: Revising Peripheral Critical Practices*, London: Routledge 2022, pp. 145–55.

32 STIMSON, “Deneocolonize your Syllabus,” *non-site* #, 2021, issue 34, <https://nonsite.org/deneocolonize-your-syllabus/> (accessed 12 May 2023).

33 Kwame NKUMAH, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, New York: International Publishers 1965.

a vehicle for reinstating an older cultural hegemonic narrative.<sup>(34)</sup> This is perhaps unnecessarily bleak, but if we wish to take up the challenge of Piotrowski's essay, we may still need to question some of its premises. On an epistemological level, we may wish to question whether there ever *can* be a non-hierarchical art history, for *any* form of inquiry involves making selections and judgements of significance. Second, if it is indeed the case, as Piotrowski contended, that the view from the periphery of East-Central Europe affords an understanding not available to the centre itself, work remains to be done on *producing* such a counter-narrative rather than merely declaiming it in the abstract. This might involve, for example, identification of conceptual and epistemic resources that might be able to challenge the dominance of "North Atlantic" art history and jettisoning the dead hand of positivism. Equally, it may be necessary to examine why many art historians in East-Central Europe appear to have acquiesced, thematically and methodologically, to their own marginalization, allowing themselves to be relegated to the status of "local experts" when the history of their discipline indicates that there is nothing inevitable about this.

The Search for Alternatives:  
Horizontal Art History, 15 Years Later

Tiráž na zadní  
straně obálky