

For the past two decades, research exhibitions in Central and Eastern Europe have supplemented art historical writing. They offered precious archival information and highlighted emancipatory practices and transnational artistic exchanges. However, I argue that art exhibitions can also challenge art historical writing through some of their particularities as cultural events. Therefore, I propose a model of art historical writing based on a curatorial methodology grounded in three key concepts: transpositionality, constellations

and heterochrony, which, in my view, open the horizon for a comparative, transnational history of exhibitions. At the same time, I argue that the self-reflexive and performative conditions of experimental art exhibitions created in Central and Eastern Europe during state socialism can also challenge the canon of exhibition histories from a situated perspective and reveal some of its unquestioned assumptions.

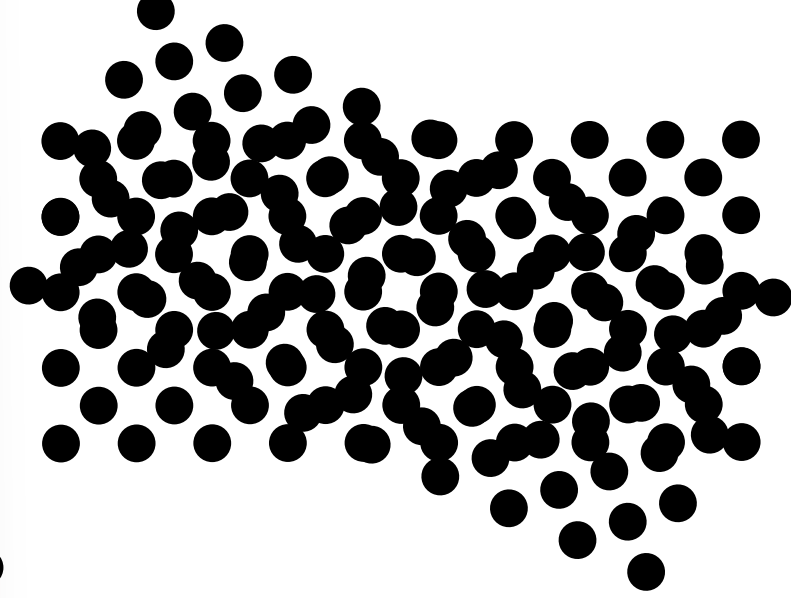
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What is at Stake in Writing Art History through Exhibition Histories in East-Central Europe?

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*What does East Central
European Exhibition
History Want?*

In a key article entitled “What does East Central European Art History Want?” Edit András claims that post-socialist art history in the region was characterized by the will to be recognized as being on a par with Western art history, manifesting a strong desire to belong – to national, regional, and finally, global discourses, canons, and institutions.⁽¹⁾ After the discipline lost its usefulness in shaping national identity, it has attempted to reposition itself and adapt to post-colonial,⁽²⁾ and more recently, decolonial narratives driving the global conversation and to integrate the epistemic forces active within these narratives.

Although Edit András claims that regional art history is a project to be abandoned today, I would like to interrogate the potential needs and benefits of turning towards exhibitions as a peculiar object of historical study in art history within and of the region. In short, why study exhibitions from a regionally situated perspective? How does this impact the writing of art history as a discipline, its situated conundrums, as well as the other histories of exhibitions in various other places? What are some of the pitfalls, difficulties, and advantages of such a study?

Despite agreeing with Edit András that these exhibitions are not to be considered in isolation from a wider, globally entangled perspective, including both the

1 Edit ANDRÁS, “What does East Central European Art History Want?” in: Christiane ERHARTER – Rawley GRAU – Urška JURMAN (eds.), *Extending the Dialogue / Essays by Igor Zabel Award Laureates, Grant Recipients, and Jury Members, 2008–2014*, Ljubljana – Berlin – Vienna: Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory – Archive Books – Erste Foundation 2016, pp. 55–77.

2 Among the most notable attempts to situate East Europe art history in conversation with post-colonial art history one should mention Piotr PIOTROWSKI’s books, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, London: Reaktion Books 2009, and *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, London: Reaktion Books 2012.

capitalist, post- or neo-colonial West and the Global South, I believe that studying exhibitions in Central and Eastern Europe can be used at the same time as a telescope, a prism and a convex mirror to reflect unquestioned assumptions, prejudices, “matters of concern” and blind spots in art historiographic writing in the region.

Methodologically, I propose to work with three main concepts that I believe to be especially useful in analyzing exhibitions: constellation, transposition, and heterochrony – each with an already long history not only in the field of exhibition studies, but also in cultural studies, where they were primarily employed.⁽³⁾ These three notions are particularly useful to reflect on other key art historical notions such as the canon, narrative, medium and network.

My suggestion is that the history of exhibitions itself might benefit from moving away from an unquestioned model of exhibitions as representational apparatuses towards an understanding of the exhibition as an event⁽⁴⁾ – and, conversely, that art history might borrow from the practice of exhibition-making or curatorial epistemology suggestions for moving away from its infatuation with explanatory, totalizing narratives and fixed meanings towards a performative model of becoming-public. The latter can be understood as an image-making, affective, polyphonic and multivocal⁽⁵⁾ cultural production.

3 In the context of exhibition and curatorial studies see the use of the exhibition as constellation in Paul O’NEILL, “The Curatorial Constellation and the Paracuratorial Paradox,” *The Exhibitionist*, 2012, issue 6, pp. 55–60. In the context of cultural studies, see the concept of heterochrony in Mieke BAL, *Double Exposures. The Subject of Cultural Analysis*, New York: Routledge 1996. As I will argue later, these concepts were originally developed in a different context by Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Mikhail Bakhtin.

4 Mieke BAL, “Le public n’existe pas,” in: Elisabeth CAILLET – Catherine PERRET (eds.), *L’art contemporain et son exposition (2)*, Paris: L’Harmattan 2007, pp. 9–36.

5 Mikhail BAKHTIN, *Speech Genre and Other Late Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press 1986.

*Exhibitions as Art
Historical Objects*

If exhibitions are a particular object of study, are they a specific class of art historical objects? It appears with increasing evidence that exhibitions are, indeed, particular in many respects. First and foremost, they are elastic media, as well as theoretical objects of inquiry performing multiple epistemic, political and social functions. Their diversity does not allow us to characterize them in separation from the space and time of their materialization, and therefore, there cannot be a homogenous methodology fitted for all types of exhibitions across their history.

For instance, one can differentiate between: group and solo exhibitions (according to the number of artists showcased and the authorial focus); thematic and monographic exhibitions; artistic research exhibitions and curatorial/art historical research exhibitions (which are assembled as the result of a curatorial research following an artistic, theoretical or art historical methodological principle or overall idea); museum collection displays vs. small gallery displays; retrospective and prospective; “world picturing” (usually pertinent for large scale, biennial-like exhibitions);⁽⁶⁾ socially engaged exhibitions (with art objects often installed in public space, and favoring performative, participative practices);⁽⁷⁾ “remembrance exhibitions” (a category thus named by exhibition theorist Reesa Greenberg);⁽⁸⁾ identity building exhibitions (which employs their compelling visuality

6 Terry SMITH, “World Picturing in Contemporary Art: The Iconogeographic Turn,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, Vol. 7, 2006, No. 1, pp. 24–46; Caroline A. JONES, *The Global Work of Art: World’s Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetic of Experience*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2017.

7 David MORRIS – Paul O’NEILL, “Exhibition as Social Intervention,” in: Joshua DECTER – Helmuth DRAXLER et. al., *Exhibition as Social Intervention. “Culture in Action” 1993*, London: Afterall Books 2014.

8 Reesa GREENBERG, “Remembering Exhibitions: From Point to Line to Web,” *Tate Papers*, 2009, issue 12, https://www.tate.org.uk/documents/333/tate_papers_12_reesa_greenberg_remembering_exhibitions_from_point_to_line_to_web.pdf (accessed April 7, 2023).

as a representational power and propaganda apparatus);⁽⁹⁾ diplomatic exhibitions (which engage in “soft power” and international political representation strategies);⁽¹⁰⁾ discursive vs. affective oriented exhibitions (according to the type of audience engagement and curatorial interpellation); circulating (traveling) vs. singular events; performative/conceptual/discursive/site-specific/site-expanded/new media/digital (according to the predominance of a certain medium or media); liminal exhibitions (organized outside the conventionally institutionalized and approved spaces, e. g. in urban streets and plazas, shop windows, cafes, private apartments, basements, natural environments, printed magazines, other non-art institutions such as churches, hospitals, botanical gardens, science research institutes etc.);⁽¹¹⁾ curated by a single person (usually an art critic, historian or “exhibition maker”) vs. collectively organized by artists, etc.

9 For exhibitions as identity building apparatuses during state socialisms see, for instance: Raino ISTO, “Between Two Easts: Picturing a Global Socialism in Albanian Postwar Art, 1959–1969,” *Art History*, Vol. 45, 2023, No. 5, pp. 1058–1077; Christine I. HO, “Crafting Friendship,” *Art History*, Vol. 45, 2023, No. 5, pp. 1016–1036. For the post-socialist period, see Raluca VOINEA, “Geographically Defined Exhibitions. The Balkans, Between Eastern Europe and the New Europe,” *Third Text*, Vol. 21, 2007, No. 2, pp. 145–151; Mária ORIŠKOVÁ, “Curating ‘Eastern Europe’: From the Politics of Representation to Collaboration and Networking,” in: Mária ORIŠKOVÁ (ed.), *Curating “Eastern Europe” and Beyond. Art Histories through the Exhibition*, Frankfurt am Main – Bratislava: Peter Lang – Veda 2013.

10 Zsuzsa LÁSZLÓ, “Exhibition as Diplomatic Tool. The Search for Artist Solidarity,” *Third Text*, Vol. 32, 2018, No. 4, pp. 412–433; Jennifer McCOMAS, “Reconstructing Cold War Diplomacy Exhibitions. The Case of Advancing American Art,” *Stedelijk Studies Journal*, 2015, issue 2, DOI: 10.54533/StedStud.vol002.art07.

11 In Eastern and Central Europe, see, for instance: Margarita TUPYTSIN – Victor TUPYTSIN et. al, *Anti-Shows. APTART 1982–84*, London: Afterall Books 2017; Ivana BAGO, “Dematerialization and Politicization of the Exhibition: Curation as Institutional Critique in Yugoslavia during the 1960s and 1970s,” *Museum and Curatorial Studies Review*, Vol. 2, 2014, No. 1, pp. 7–37; Pavlína MORGANOVÁ – Terezie NEKVINDOVÁ – Dagmar SVATOŠOVÁ (eds.), *Výstava jako médium. České umění 1957–1999*, Praha: NAVU 2022; Katalin CSEH–VARGA, *The Hungarian Avant-Garde and Socialism. The Art of the Second Public Sphere*, London – New York: Bloomsbury 2023; Cristian NAE, “Basements, Attics, Streets and Courtyards: the Reinvention of Marginal Art Spaces in Romania during Socialism,” in: Katalin CSEH–VARGA – Adam CZIRAK (eds.), *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere: Event-Based Art in Late Socialist Europe*, New York: Routledge 2018, pp. 75–88.

The variety of exhibitions in Central and Eastern Europe that I only incompletely and selectively exemplify here proves once again that the art exhibition is particularly resistant to unification. The fact that exhibitions, in their form, function, and motivations for existence, are inherently tied with a particular space-time continuum makes them singular ontological entities. They are, in other words, inherently situated cultural objects, and convey emplaced meanings. This aspect will become particularly important especially in relation to the prospect of practicing a comparative art history, and even more so in the case of devising a comparative history of exhibitions.

Moreover, unlike many other image or object-based practices, exhibitions are temporary, fleeting instances of coming-together in public, which assemble artworks into singular configurations based on networks of relations among its constituent elements, whose effects are at the same time aesthetic, epistemic and performative, and whose afterlife, like in the case of performance art, largely depends on their documentation. That is why exhibitions seem even more precious today: they are uncollectable objects, and, as such, exercise a certain fascination and trigger affective responses from the part of art historians and contemporary publics alike, on a par with those exercised by performance art. Their reconstruction is even more difficult, given the multiplicity of agents involved in their construction, the variety of documents (oral testimonies of participants and members of the public, administrative and personal letters, exhibition plans, press releases, art critical reviews etc.) and the scarcity of their visual documentation (which most often relies on exhibition shots).

Before becoming an object of study, exhibitions were and are still used in the region as instruments of making (instead of just writing) critical art history. Some of the most notable examples in this respect include the exhibitions *The Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present* (1998) and *Interrupted Histories* (2006), curated by Zdenka Badovinac; *East of Eden. Photorealism: Versions of Reality*

(2012), curated by Nikolett Eröss at Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art Budapest; *Cold Revolution. Central and Eastern European Societies in Times of Socialist Realism, 1948–1959* (2021), curated by Joanna Kordjak and Jérôme Bazin at the Zachęta National Gallery, Warsaw, and *The Other Trans-Atlantic. Kinetic and Op Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America 1950s–1970s*, curated by Marta Dzięwańska, Dieter Roelstraete and Abigail Winograd at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw in collaboration with Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow and SESC São Paulo.⁽¹²⁾ Such exhibitions based on curatorial research that took up the task of rewriting art history in a different medium and form (sometimes benefiting from the art historical input of a multinational research team) are, themselves, worthy of a separate study.⁽¹³⁾ They attempted to supplement missing art historical narratives and to amend the lack of empirical knowledge and archival documentation, often in a comparative manner.

Particularly important were exhibitions that undertook the politically emancipatory function of addressing biases in existing national art historical narratives. Many were meant to challenge and amend a white- and male-based art historical canon and narrative long shared with Western art history. A famous example of this kind is perhaps the

12 Other notable exhibitions include: *On the Eastern Front. Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989–2009*, curators Rita Kálmán and Tijana Stepanović, Budapest: Ludwig Múzeum 2010; *The Travelers: Voyage and Migration in New Art from Central and Eastern Europe*, curator Magdalena Moskalewicz, Warsaw: Zachęta National Gallery 2016; *Southern Constellations. The Poetics of the Non-Aligned*, curator Bojana Piškur, Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija – Museum of Contemporary Art 2019; and *24 Arguments. Early Encounters in Romanian Neo-Avant-Garde 1969–1971*, curators Alina Șerban and Ștefania Ferchedău, Bucharest: Romanian National Museum of Art 2019–2020.

13 Other national scale retrospective exhibitions, as well as solo presentations of important Eastern European artists (such as Július Koller, Mladen Stilinović, Tomislav Gotovac, Raša Todosijević, Sanja Iveković, Geta Brătescu, Ion Grigorescu, Paul Neagu, Jiří Kovanda, Stanislav Kolibal, Włodzimirz Borowski, Edward Krasiński, Ewa Partum or Gyula Várnai) in various Art Museums and National Pavilions at the Venice Biennale for the past decade are also worth mentioning in this respect, creating dense archival material.

Gender Check project, curated by Bojana Pejić with the help of a multinational research team, installed at MuMOK in Vienna in 2010. However, it would perhaps be more fitting to evoke in this context exhibitions that also performed the task of historicizing exhibitions in an exhibition form not as singular moments in time, but as invitations to further research local and regional art historical contexts. For instance, the exhibition *Three Women*, curated by Ewa Toniak at Zacheta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw (2011), brought into dialogue the works of three major Polish women artists, Maria Pinińska-Bereś, Natalia Lach-Lachowicz and Ewa Partum, echoing the previous exhibition with the same title installed at Arsenal Gallery, Poznan, in 1978 through the collective work of Anna Bednarczuk, Izabella Gustowska and Krystyna (Krynica) Piotrowska, and employing a procedure that Reesa Greenberg cataloged as a “riff.”⁽¹⁴⁾ While such examples contribute to national and transnational art history, remembering cultural events that otherwise turn quickly into oblivion given their temporariness, such exhibitions are also examples of writing art history in a different form.

*What Can Art History
Learn from Exhibitions?
Transpositions, Constellations
and Object Biographies*

If exhibitions are acknowledged as significant objects of research aside from artworks and other documents (conversations, travel documents, oral histories of reception etc.), an important task for exhibition historians is to explain how the exhibition form can challenge art historical narratives – and thus, how studying exhibitions could not only replicate

14 Reesa GREENBERG, “Remembering Exhibitions: From Point to Line to Web,” *Tate Papers*, 2009, issue 12, https://www.tate.org.uk/documents/333/tate_papers_12_reesa_greenberg_remembering_exhibitions_from_point_to_line_to_web.pdf (accessed April 7, 2023).

the dominant art historical narratives, but also reshape them in meaningful ways.⁽¹⁵⁾ Facing this challenge, several methodological assumptions may be useful.

In the first place, exhibitions as historical objects of study may be approached through the Benjaminian concept of “the dialectical image” that has already been employed by various exhibition theorists and scholars of curatorial research.⁽¹⁶⁾ Exhibitions bring the past into present not as a temporal progression, but as an image,⁽¹⁷⁾ and, simultaneously, link the present to the past, that is recuperate, reinvent, reinterpret, revalue, reimagine the past *for the present*. According to Walter Benjamin: “it’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather [dialectical] image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill.”⁽¹⁸⁾ The dialectical image is both an object of historical circumspection and an optic through which normative historical narratives are critiqued. The exhibition may appear, therefore, as a “field of forces” which disturbs art history and challenges existing narratives, rather than as a specific closed micro-narrative which should be inserted into those narratives that dominate the art historical books and museum collection displays alike. For example, an exhibition such as *Romanian Art Today*, installed in 1971 at Richard Demarco Gallery in Edinburgh, or the group exhibitions of Hungarian Neo-Avantgarde Artists installed at BWA Poznan in 1970 and at Foksal Gallery in 1972 (with

15 For similar attempts see Bruce ALTSHULER, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century*, New York: Harry N. Abrams 1994.
16 Lucy STEEDS, “What is the Future of Exhibition Histories? Or, Toward Art in Terms of its Becoming Public,” in: Paul O’NEILL – Mick WILSON – Lucy STEEDS (eds.), *The Curatorial Conundrum. What to Study? What to Research? What to Practice?*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press 2016, pp. 16–25.
17 Max PENSKY, *Method and Time: Benjamin’s Dialectical Images*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004, pp. 177–198.
18 Walter BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 2002, p. 262.

the support of János Brendel) would be equally important from the perspective of promoting a “partisan canon”⁽¹⁹⁾ of neo-avant-garde artists as it is from that of the omissions, of the repetitions of artists and of the curatorial choices for each exhibition.⁽²⁰⁾ Such exhibitions allow an art historian to question the subsequent heroization of performance art, conceptual art, or other experimental art practices, displaced from their current museological condition of rare artefacts to the early context of their production, inquiring their adaptations and translations for different audiences at that time. Oscillating between past and present, it becomes equally relevant to reconstruct how Polish artists and critics understood their fellow Hungarian artists in the above-mentioned exhibitions, and what were the differences (if any) from the Ipartev exhibitions in which they were present,⁽²¹⁾ as it is to narrate the construction of a certain artistic production against the background of state-supported socialist institutions.

I would like to introduce at this point two more analytical concepts, borrowed from curatorial theorist Beatrice von Bismarck,⁽²²⁾ which may be useful in understanding how the history of exhibitions may challenge not only art history in general, but especially the conundrum expressed at the beginning of this text: how can regional art history be reconciled with global art history?

The first concept I would like to introduce is that of “transpositionality,” which designates the movement of a cultural element through different discursive, cultural,

19 Anna BRZYSKI (ed.), *Partisan Canons*, Durham – London: Duke University Press 2007.

20 One notices for instance the presence of Miklós Erdély, Endre Tót, György Jovánovics, Miklós Erdély, Tamás Szentjóbó, Gyula Konkoly and László Lakner – all present also in the famous Ipartev exhibitions that took place in Budapest in 1968 and 1969, or the repetition of Romanian artists Horia Bernea, Paul Neagu, Ion Bitzan, Serban Epure, Pavel Ilie or Diet Seyler in several exhibitions of Romanian art installed abroad between 1969 and 1972.

21 For a brief analysis of these exhibitions see Viktória POPOVICS, “Whereof / Il n’est pas Possible / Sprechen / Arról / Trzeba Milczeć.” *Hungarian Exhibitions in Poland in the First Half of the 1970s*, Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łódźii 2018, pp. 293–310.

22 Beatrice von BISMARCK, *The Curatorial Condition*, Berlin: Sternberg Press 2022.

social, political, linguistic and media environments and the transformations it undergoes because of these positional and relational exchanges. As such, objects do not necessarily change their material constituency, and are not copied or reproduced into another medium – although, sometimes, they may expand their ontology and transform from physical objects into photographic documentations (as in the case of conceptual art, ephemeral land art installation or performance art), or into constituents of art critical, art historical, curatorial and other interpretive discourses. According to Michael Schwab, “what changes in a transposition are the interrelations of material objects in the world and, hence, the difference of meaning that those objects carry across distinct positions.”⁽²³⁾ Assembling an exhibition means, in the first place, to transpose an object from an archive, a studio or another collection into a temporary site of public display, where it is linked to other similar objects. Therefore, it means to immerse it into a network of discursive relations and sensorial as well as intellectual responses.

Thus, we touch upon the performative (political and epistemic) effects of exhibitions⁽²⁴⁾ analyzed in spatial terms, which may help us interrogate their relevance for the geography of art. From this perspective, exhibitions move objects in space and across different contexts – from

23 Michael SCHWAB, “Transpositionality and Artistic Research,” in: Michael SCHWAB (ed.), *Transpositions: Aesthetico-Epistemic Operators in Artistic Research*, Leuven: Leuven University Press 2018, p. 191.

24 For the expansion of linguistic performatives into the art field as a matter of political efficacy see Dorothea von HANTELMMANN, *How to Do Things with Art. The Meanings of Art’s Performativity*, Zurich: JRP/Ringier 2010. For an extension of the term towards an analysis of the exhibition as ideological and rhetorical apparatuses, see Tiffany SUTTON, “How to Do Things without Words,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 61, 2003, No. 1, pp. 48; Dorothea von HANTELMMANN, “The Curatorial Paradigm,” in: Jens HOFFMANN (ed.), *The Exhibitionist: Journal on Exhibition making – The First Six Years*, New York: The Exhibitionist 2017, pp. 227–28; Paul O’NEILL, “The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse,” in: Elena FILIPOVIC – Marieke VAN HAL – Solveig ØVSTEBO (eds.), *The Biennial Reader. An Anthology of Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz 2010, pp. 240–257; Bruce W. FERGUSON, “Exhibition Rhetorics: Material Speech and Utter Sense,” in: Reesa GREENBERG – Bruce W. FERGUSON – Sandy NAIRNE (eds.), *Thinking about Exhibitions*, London: Routledge 1996, pp. 126–136.

the artist's studio or the art collection to the gallery space, from the gallery to various para-exhibitionary sites, as well as from the local to the international. It also enables and facilitates the circulation of people, images, and ideas across different cultural and political contexts of reception. This allows art historians to materially (re)trace the circulation of objects, images and artists within different networks of power and within the art field, and to understand what they exhibited, to whom, and who was responsible for a particular selection. It also enables art historians to consider forms and technologies of visibility and of making visible, and to track down actual international encounters of artists as well as curated juxtapositions of artworks through exhibitions, indicating how certain artworks were framed and contextualized in each case. Such questions are of utmost importance for art produced and exhibited in Central and Eastern Europe during state socialism: a certain artwork might be framed differently for a foreign audience, while a certain artist might exhibit different artworks to different audiences in different cultural contexts. Also, national commissioners would sometimes select artworks according to specific politics of representation, thus controlling international encounters through diplomatic exhibitions such as *Poland – Czechoslovakia: Centuries of Neighborhood and Friendship* (1977–1978).⁽²⁵⁾

Assessing the transnational circulation of Eastern European artists through various institutional channels

25 The exhibition was organized by the Polish, Czech and Slovak Ministries of Culture, with the support of the National Museum in Cracow and the Slovak National Museum, and was commissioned by Tadeusz Chruściński, director of the National Museum in Cracow, and Jozef Vlachovič, director of the Slovak National Museum in Bratislava. It toured to Cracow, Warsaw, Bratislava and Prague. For an analysis of the political instrumentalization of this exhibition to support “friendship” between neighboring countries in the Eastern bloc see Petra SKARUPSKY, “Exhibition as the Controlled Encounter of Two Countries: ‘Poland – Czechoslovakia: Centuries of Neighborhood and Friendship’ (1977–1978),” *MIEJSCE*, 2019, issue 5, <http://miejsce.asp.waw.pl/en/english-exhibition-as-the-controlled-encounter-of-two-countries-polandczechoslovakia-centuries-of-neighborhood-and-friendship-1977-1978/> (accessed October 20, 2023).

also allows us to place art history firmly within a broader horizon, while attempting to smooth out the national element still present in the narrative. However, researching it through the exhibition networks established among state-supported or self-managed, artist-run institutions, may also reveal prejudices that are still active when considering artworks in isolation from their context of circulation and public exposure. For instance, it may further undermine the dichotomy between “official” and “unofficial” artists, as well as that between state-supported and independent art spaces, revealing artists that were in both spaces and travelled through various heterogeneous networks, as well as transversal and lateral connections constructed through innovative exhibition formats, such as the postcard, the artist book or magazine, the poster and window-shop display etc. Another important aspect that may be laid bare by researching the material infrastructure of exhibitions is the alleged “horizontality”⁽²⁶⁾ of artistic travels, which, in Eastern Europe, was often restricted and controlled by the political regimes.⁽²⁷⁾

Not only that a materialist art historical approach might show the biases, differences in financial access, and difficulties of communicating to foreign audiences, but they may also reveal motivations for sponsoring cultural events, be it state-sponsorship, or otherwise self-organized, yet tolerated events, the likes of which I will turn to at the end of my article – and, even the lack of such sponsorship in the case of inventive forms of communication

26 I use the term in the egalitarian sense popularized by Piotr Piotrowski as opposed to the writing of art history based on mostly unquestioned and Western-biased artistic hierarchies.

27 In the 1980s, the period of harshest political and cultural restrictions in Romania, artists that were not supported by the state could not travel physically across borders even to neighboring Eastern European countries such as Hungary. Consequently, for instance, the artist Teodor Graur used in his work *The Bridge* photographically documented performances which included text – long stripes of white cloth on which he wrote “Experimental Art” and “Budapest 1989.” Such light artworks could travel through private channels by mail and be exhibited in Budapest in 1986 without any intervention by the authorities.

such as self-produced artists' books, performance art, language-based conceptual art pieces, photomontages, hand-made stamps, prints produced with the mimeograph and other forms of mail art. Such an analysis also reveals the imbrication between politics and exhibitions as forms of national or ideological identity construction through artistic representations, without reducing the exhibition to the political factor or background.

Analyses of exhibitions as sites of transnational circulation are facilitated by approaching the exhibition not as a sequential arrangement of images in space, or as a narrative, but rather as a constellation. According to Beatrice von Bismarck, "a constellation is a flexible, relational structure linking individual elements that are themselves subject to change. It thus captures a moment in the configuration of elements that is unstable and ephemeral, and it presents unfinished stages of coming-together."⁽²⁸⁾ The concept *Konstellation* was developed by Walter Benjamin in relation to allegory, the theory of language and, in particular, with the concept of the dialectical image, to designate the fleeting moment in which the singular conjunction of stars and their alignments can become meaningful for an individual (for instance, in the zodiac), something that he sometimes distinguishes from the constellation as an image of fixed stars (*Sternbild*). The constellation is not a given structure, but a temporary construct, an object in the making, an assemblage of both fixed and moving positions. It is heterogenous, elastic (malleable), able to create new associations, rhizomatic (that is, horizontal, decentralized, with multiple points of entrance and exit), networked, partially non-narrative (that is, polyphonic) and holistic, in the sense that the meaning of the whole supersedes and results from the interconnections of its individual elements. Analyzing the concept from the point

28 Beatrice von BISMARCK, *The Curatorial Condition*, Berlin: Sternberg Press 2022, p. 20.

of view of a theory of reading, Andrea Krauss states that constellations

designate an interpretive procedure that draws specific attention to the instable conditions of this interpretation: To look from the earth into the sky in order to 'read' the positions of the stars to one another, the constellations, is to become a relative observer in relation to an investigative object that is continually shifting.⁽²⁹⁾

Using this analytical concept is particularly useful in challenging the undisputed centrality of the notions of narrative and chronology in art history through the import of visual thinking. It is in Adorno and Benjamin's writings that we also find montage as a technique of constructing constellations.⁽³⁰⁾ As a visual articulation, montage breaks open narratives, undermines causal connections and hierarchical distributions. It allows not for fixed images and meanings, but for processes of coming together, advocating an inherently unfinished historiography, which lays bare the process of becoming visible and thus develops the potentialities that were not actualized by these exhibitions in their own time.

However, more concrete consequences of transposing curatorial thinking in terms of "constellations" in the writing of art history looking from these particular "margins" (as Piotr Piotrowski famously described the situated look coming from East-Central Europe)⁽³¹⁾ concern the methodology of comparative analysis, developed by Tomáš

29 Andrea KRAUSS, "Constellations: A Brief Introduction," *MLN*, Vol. 126, 2011, No. 3, GERMAN ISSUE: Constellations / Konstellationen, p. 439.

30 Anthony AUERBACH, "Imagine No Metaphors: The Dialectical Image of Walter Benjamin," *Image & Narrative*, 2007, issue 18, http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/thinking_pictures/auerbach.htm (accessed April 12, 2023).

31 PIOTROWSKI, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, p. 29.

Pospiszyl into what he has designates as an “associative art history.”⁽³²⁾ Namely, it opens up the possibility of inserting artworks into new networks of unexpected associations with artworks simultaneously produced in other regions. Looking particularly at those associations that have already been realized by curators so far equates with researching interpretive constellations fixed in a material form through their documentation. It also allows art historians to think likewise and project in discursive forms historically unmaterialized associative potentialities. Exhibitions like *Transmissions*⁽³³⁾ and *The Other Trans-Atlantic*⁽³⁴⁾ retrospectively drew parallels between art practices from the two regions in an attempt to get away from the scrutinizing gaze of the West that functioned as a way of legitimation from the “other,” as Piotr Piotrowski noticed in the case of early large-scale exhibitions of East European art organized by Western institutions.⁽³⁵⁾

Going back to the notion of “transpositionality,” my methodological proposal is to integrate it in a comparative study of exhibitions. This enterprise may borrow methodological clues from related methodologies and disciplines such as “museum studies” and “object biography,”⁽³⁶⁾ considering, for instance, how a certain artwork moved *across* different types of exhibitions and contexts of reception, and how it was framed in each case. Thus, one would allow for such a history to unfold across the local, national, transnational, regional, and transregional levels, according

32 Tomáš POSPISZYL, *An Associative Art History: Comparative Studies of Neo-Avant-Gardes in a Bipolar World*, Geneva: JRP/Ringier 2018.

33 *Transmissions. Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980*, curators Stuart Comer, Roxana Marcoci, Christian Rattemeyer, Giampaolo Bianconi and Martha Joseph, New York: Museum of Modern Art 2015–2016.

34 *The Other Trans-Atlantic. Kinetic and Op Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1950s–1970s*, curators Marta Dziewańska, Dieter Roelstraete, Abigail Winograd, Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art 2017–2018.

35 PIOTROWSKI, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, p. 15.

36 Chris GOSDEN – Yvonne MARSHALL, “The Cultural Biography of Objects,” *World Archaeology*, Vol. 31, 1999, No. 2, pp. 169–178; Kate HILL (ed.), *Museums and Biographies: Stories, Objects, Identities*, London: Boydell and Brewer 2012.

to the singular story of the object at hand. It is equally important to reveal how artworks were set into dialogue, proximity, or opposition in different exhibition contexts. A comparative analysis of the ways objects circulated and were constellated within various exhibitions would also illuminate differences between each situation of public presentation, revealing the meanings acquired through these transpositions. It can also differentiate between its different audiences, publics and counter-publics.⁽³⁷⁾

Reception analysis is also particularly useful in revealing the constellation of constraints operating upon the regime of becoming public inherent to the exhibition as a cultural apparatus. These include political censorship and discursive technologies of exclusion and marginalization through curatorial selection, framing, display, focalization,⁽³⁸⁾ and textual interpretation. The very notions of the public sphere and the regimes of visibility that the exhibition is usually associated with are also influential in framing a certain exhibition.⁽³⁹⁾ Thus, one reconstructs a multi-layered cultural history of the objects themselves – something methodologically akin to both social art history, reception theory and object biography – employing them as a prism through which various other disciplinary issues may be addressed.

Last, but not least, any comparative history of exhibitions is unthinkable without the critical study not only of the exhibited material objects (which include images and performances embedded in various media such as photography, painting, sculpture, moving images and the human body), but also of the documentation of these exhibitions,

37 Michael WARNER, *Publics and Counterpublics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2005.

38 Mieke BAL, “Guest Column: Exhibition Practices,” *PMLA*, Vol. 125, 2010, No. 1, pp. 9–23.

39 Cristian NAE, “Fissures in the Public Sphere: Experimental Exhibition Practices in Romanian Art, in the Period of Late Socialism,” in: Cristian NAE (ed.), *(In)Visible Frames: Rhetorics and Experimental Exhibition Practices in Romania 1965–1989*, Cluj – Bucharest: Idea Design and Print – Unarte 2016, pp. 25–42.

and of their paraphernalia as cultural objects. Such analysis can be performed from the perspective of visual and cultural studies, answering vital questions such as: what types of photographic images are used to document a certain exhibition, who captured those images, and how? What type of photographic gaze do they evoke or invite from the viewer, and what type of posterity do they envision? What type of invitations and posters are accompanying it as a public discourse, what type of design do they employ? If such questions may seem banal for exhibitions documented in museums or biennials in the Western world, they are of utmost importance in social and political contexts where access to technologies of documentation was restricted and controlled, often becoming representational instruments for socialist and nationalist ideologies. Often, the very materiality of these documents (their quality, point of view etc.) implicitly frames a certain event as a trace of cultural autonomy or as a politically engaged apparatus.

Mediators and Political Agency

The transpositional work performed by art exhibitions, and their privileged capacity not only to temporarily host and constellate, but also to place into circulation objects, as well as ideas and, most importantly, people, turns them into key cultural facilitators and political agents at the same time. In this respect, the history of exhibitions became an important part of the history of transnational circulations and artistic exchanges within and outside Eastern Europe.

Biennials (in their either national or transnational formats) were the privileged type of exhibitions to act as vectors of cultural translation and transference, facilitating transnational encounters among artists from Eastern Europe and artists beyond the Eastern bloc.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Biennial

40 Charles GREEN – Anthony GARDNER (eds.), *Biennials, Triennials and Documenta. The Exhibitions that Made Contemporary Art*, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell 2016.

exhibitions and festivals, especially those organized outside of the North-Western hemisphere such as São Paulo, Havana,⁽⁴¹⁾ Ljubljana⁽⁴²⁾ or the World Festival of Youth and Students, organized in Moscow, as well as other Eastern European cities such as Prague, Budapest, Bucharest, Warsaw or Sofia, offer a fertile ground to assess and perhaps criticize unidirectional notions such as influence, and to address the questions of cultural translation and transculturation. The latter are fruitfully analyzed through Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the "contact zone,"⁽⁴³⁾ conceived as a site where different groups struggle for recognition outside their original localities; this concept may serve as an appropriate theoretical framework. How did artists import, select, and translate ideas and techniques adapted for such encounters and in their wake?

At the same time, one should also pay attention to the existing contacts among artists established through exhibitions, some of which lasted for a long time in the form of intellectual friendships, especially the self-organized or "semi-official"⁽⁴⁴⁾ kind that became a characteristic of Central and East European neo-avantgarde art exhibitions during the 1970s.⁽⁴⁵⁾ But traveling and international art exhibitions which showcased foreign artists in the former

- 41 Rachel WEISS et. al, *Making Art Global (Part 1). The Third Havana Biennial 1989*, London: Afterall Books 2011.
- 42 Bojana VIDEKANIĆ, *Nonaligned Modernism. Socialist Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia 1945–1985*, Montreal – Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press 2020.
- 43 Mary Louise PRATT, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession*, 1991, pp. 33–40.
- 44 CSEH-VARGA, *The Hungarian Avant-Garde and Socialism*, pp. 101–143.
- 45 Some of the best-known examples include the Meeting of Czech, Slovak and Hungarian Artists organized by László Beke at Balatonboglár Chapel in 1972, or the exhibitions organized in a basement space (Podroom – The Working Community of Artists) in Zagreb by Sanja Iveković and Dalibor Martinis. Often, they invited other artists to engage critically with the site. For instance, Mladen Stilinović conceived a series of exhibitions and events in 1978 under the title *Works in the Basement*. For the latter, see Ivana BAGO, "A Window and a Basement: Negotiating Hospitality at La Galerie des Locataires and Podroom – The Working Community of Artists," *Artmargins*, Vol. 1, 2012, No. 1–2, pp. 116–146. Similarly, one could include in this category most of the exhibitions organized in Akumulatory or Foksal Galleries in Poland, in the Student Centers in Zagreb and Belgrade, The Worker's Club in Prague, Galerie Mladých in Bratislava and the Youth Cultural Center in Budapest in the 1970s.

Eastern bloc also performed an additional function that we may call “phantasmatic:” in the context of restricted cultural circulation, they opened an imaginary space of encounter with artists and artworks provided during the Cold War, and access to the types of artistic identities and meanings that these exhibitions projected to different audiences. Therefore, defined as chronotopes,⁽⁴⁶⁾ curated exhibitions perform the task of mediating between different horizons of expectation.

Examples of exhibitions that moved across the Iron Curtain during the Cold War that have already been analyzed include *15 Polish painters* curated by Peter Salz at MoMA, New York 1961, the traveling exhibitions of Henry Moore’s art in Romania, Hungary and Czechoslovakia (1966–1967) and of American art in Romania and Czechoslovakia such as *Disappearance and Reappearance of the Image: American Painting since 1945* (1969).⁽⁴⁷⁾ Others have assessed group exhibitions that assembled artists from Eastern Europe and Western countries from the perspective of misunderstandings and failed artistic encounters. Famous is the *Works and Worlds* exhibition at De Appel, Amsterdam (1979), already analyzed as a watershed moment in the

46 Mikhail BAKHTIN, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” in: Mikhail BAKHTIN, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin: University of Texas Press 1981, pp. 84–258.

47 Organized by the British Council, the traveling exhibition *Henry Moore* was shown in 1966 at Dalles Hall in Bucharest, at the Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava and The National Gallery in Prague. The traveling exhibition *Disappearance and Reappearance of the Image: American Painting since 1945* was organized by Harold. W. Graham and curated by Tom Freudenheim as representatives of the International Art Program of the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C., with loans from the Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Guggenheim Museum, The Whitney Museum of American Art and Leo Castelli Gallery. It was shown between January and November 1969 in Romania, Czechoslovakia and Belgium. For a history of the reception of the exhibition in Romania see: Mihai DOMOCO, “American Painting (excerpt),” in: Claudia HOPKINS – Iain BOYD WHYTE (eds.), *Hot Art, Cold War – Southern and Eastern European Writing on American Art 1945–1990*, New York: Routledge 2020, pp. 330–331, and Dan GRIGORESCU, “The Disappearance and Re-appearance of Image: American Painting after 1945,” in: *Ibid.*, pp. 332–336. For analyses in Czechoslovakia see: Mária ORIŠKOVÁ, “Výstavy moderného amerického umenia v Československu počas studenej vojny a ambivalentná agenda kultúrnej diplomacie,” *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, 2019, issue 26, pp. 44–62.

construction of the umbrella-term “Eastern European art,” as well as in relation to artistic and national identity,⁽⁴⁸⁾ though many others, such as *Actual Art in Eastern Europe* (ICC Antwerp, 1974), and, conversely, group exhibitions gathering international artists in Eastern Europe like *IAM – International Artists Meeting*⁽⁴⁹⁾ performance-based event organized by Remont Gallery in Warsaw in 1978 are worth mentioning and studying in detail.

Speaking from Central and Eastern Europe, one cannot avoid the socialist identity historically underpinning the region and the wider context of the Cold War, as well as the relations between socialist states and the Third World. From such a perspective, it is worthwhile today to study the form and functions of the “diplomatic exhibitions” as representational, cultural, and transpositional political apparatuses, and contribute to the study of the lateral, horizontal artistic connections established within the Global South.⁽⁵⁰⁾

*The Alter-Globalist Turn,
or, What Can Exhibition
History Learn from Central
and Eastern Europe?*

In the last part of this text, I would like to briefly mention some possible responses to another question, one that deserves a separate study: what can the history of exhibitions

48 Klara KEMP WELCH, *Networking the Bloc. Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press 2019; Zsuzsa LÁSZLÓ, “Works and Words. The Invention and Renunciation of the Concept of East European Art,” *Institute of the Present*, November 2018, <https://institutulprezentului.ro/en/2018/11/15/works-and-words-the-invention-and-renunciation-of-the-concept-of-east-european-art/> (accessed October 10, 2023).

49 *IAM – International Artists Meeting* was organized by Henryk Gajewski at Remont Gallery, Warsaw in April 1978. For an online documentation see the performance archives of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (Muzeum Stuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie), accessible at <https://artmuseum.pl/en/performans/archiwum/2739?read=all> (accessed October 27, 2023).

50 Recent edited volumes which address this topic include: Flavia FRIGERI – Kristian HANDBERG (eds.), *New Histories of Art in the Global Postwar Era. Multiple Modernisms*, London: Routledge 2021.

as a discipline learn from exhibitions that took place in Central and Eastern Europe? This question raises a series of other questions concerning the canon of exhibition histories that, as an academic discipline, it unfortunately tends to replicate: what exhibitions do we choose to study and why? What are the effects of repeating some canonical examples time and again? And what do these exhibitions reveal about our present condition and our unacknowledged collective desires?

For the past ten years, the attempts of writing exhibition histories in the region have shifted from an urgent need to fill in gaps in art historical knowledge, retrieving documentation of locally significant events that would have the potential to fit into larger narratives and enter into dialogue with better known exhibitions especially from France, the UK and the USA, as well as with other exhibitions from the Eastern bloc, to research of transnational or international touring exhibitions.⁽⁵¹⁾ In brief, there have been four main categories of exhibitions under study so far: diplomatic exhibitions, museum/national identity building exhibitions (which respond to a national and international scale of analysis), transnational exhibitions (analyzed mostly as discursive practices), and local, self-managed, experimental exhibitions (analyzed in relation to their site-specificity, the semiotics of the exhibition space and their relation to the public sphere).

Taking a hasty look at the radical, challenging, and innovative formats which expanded and redefined the

51 Some of these notable collective efforts include the online project *Parallel Chronologies*, edited by Dóra Hegyi and Zsuzsa László (see: <https://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/>); the edited volume by Mária ORIŠKOVÁ, *Curating "Eastern Europe" and Beyond*; nationally focused edited volumes like NAE, *(In)Visible Frames*; the special issue of *Ikonomika* (26/2016), dedicated to the history of exhibitions in Polish art institutions, edited by Gabriela Świtek; Alina ŠERBAN – Ștefania FERCHEDĂU (ed.), *24 Arguments. Early Encounters in Romanian Neo-Avant-Garde 1969–1971* (exh. catalog), Bucharest: P+4 Publishers 2022, which retrace the exhibitions organized by Richard Demarco involving Romanian artists; and chapters in: Agnieszka CHMIELEWSKA – Irena KOSSOWSKA – Marcin LACHOWSKI, *State Construction and Art in East Central Europe 1918–2018*, London: Routledge 2022.

medium of the exhibition in experimental, neo-avant-garde art produced in the region between 1960 and 1989, a salient characteristic is the performative and conceptual aspect of exhibitions which constantly undermine their representational function. Another striking feature is that these exhibitions do not necessarily show or circulate artistic objects, but rather construct aesthetic situations and interrogate institutional, cultural, political and existential conditions of artistic reception, viewership and participation. This shift from the exhibition as a representational technology to the exhibition as an artistic, self-organized performative event contributes to characterizing the exhibition as an unstable object of study. It is associated with a series of gestures that disturb epistemic and disciplinary boundaries, interpellate the audience and point towards specific institutional and social contexts, rather than with an already articulated discourse.

Borrowing terms from a history of dissenting exhibitions in Latin America sketched by art historian Olga Fernández López,⁽⁵²⁾ and constructing new tentative categories, one can identify several types of exhibitions, many documented in collective projects such as the already mentioned *Parallel Chronologies*. The first one is the participative exhibition, exemplified by a series of exhibitions curated by Zeliko Koscević at the Student Center Gallery in Zagreb such as the group exhibition *Hit Parade* (1967), destroyed on the opening day because the public understood it as an invitation to vandalize the works on display,⁽⁵³⁾ or

52 Olga FERNÁNDEZ LÓPEZ, *Dissenting Exhibitions by Artists (1968–1998). Reframing Marxist Exhibition Legacy* [Ph. D. thesis], London: Royal College of Art 2011.

53 *Hit Parade* (Hit Parada) was organized by Zeliko Koscević at SC Gallery Zagreb in 1967 and comprised works by Mladen Galić, Ante Kuduz, Ljerka Šibenik und Miroslav Šutej. Amplified by the live music and theatrical activities performed during the exhibition by members of the Student Center, the environmental character of some of the art installations on display elicited such a response from the public. Šutej installed hanging multicolored tape at the entrance, while Šibenik installed hundreds of blue and white helium-filled balloons floating in the center of the gallery space. For a contextual analysis of the exhibition see Marko ILIĆ, *A Slow Burning Fire. The Rise of the New Art Practice in Yugoslavia*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press 2021, pp. 19–20.

the *Sum 680* environment by Slobodan Dimitrević (1969), consisting of 680 painted tin cans which could be rearranged by the audience. The curatorial work of Koscević and Vjeran Zuppa for the *Exhibition of Women and Men* installed at SC Gallery in 1969, which left the space open and the public became both the object on display and of mutual scrutiny, can also be recalled in this respect, although it was usually connected with conceptual art.⁽⁵⁴⁾ It is notable, however, that, no matter if Koscević was aware of Lucy Lippard and Chandler's famous definition of conceptual art as dematerialized art, he nevertheless performed it with a different scope and from a different position – that of intervening in a didactic way in the structure of power relations between an institution and the art public. In the Slovak context, one could also mention the project “J. K. Ping-Pong Club” by Július Koller which blurred the boundaries between artistic manifestations and ordinary events such as friendly sport contests, fostering social relations between the participations turned into players.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Such projects not only redirected attention towards everyday life as the raw material of art, but also questioned the efficacy of the forms of collective agency predicated by the ideology of state socialism.

The second category could consist of “meta-exhibitions.” Often overlapping with what is already known in Western Europe and North America as “institutional

54 As Ivana Bago recalls, confused visitors were given handouts with the following text: “For god's sake, be the exhibition. At this exhibition, you are the artwork, you are the figuration... you are socialist realism. Careful, your eyes are observing you. You are the body in space, you are a body that moves, you are the kinetic sculpture, you are spatial dynamism. Art is not situated next to you. There either is no art or it is you.” See Ivana BAGO, “Dematerialization and Politicization of the Exhibition: Curation as Institutional Critique in Yugoslavia during the 1960s and 1970s,” *Museum and Curatorial Studies Review*, Vol. 2, 2014, No. 1, p. 10.

55 See Daniel GRUŇ, “Species of Exhibition Spaces and Artists' Communities in 1970s and '80s Slovakia,” *Parallel Chronologies. Collection of Exhibitions in Eastern Europe 1950–1989*, <https://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/essays/daniel-grun-non-exhibitions-and-artists-communities-in-the-1970s-and-80-in-czechoslovakia-slovakia/> (accessed on October 28, 2023).

critique,” it comprises mainly conceptual interventions which reflected on the institutional conditions of exhibition and the significance of becoming an artist, as well as on the semiotics of the gallery space. Exemplary in this respect are Goran Trbuljak's conceptual art “anti-exhibitions” at the Student Center Gallery Zagreb in 1968 and 1973 (*I do not want to show anything new and original* and *The fact that somebody is given the opportunity to make an exhibition is more important than what is shown at that exhibition*). Another interesting example is the artistic decision of Koscević not to open the package sent from Paris containing the mail art in the Envois section of the Seventh Paris Biennale in 1971, and to display the package as such in the 1972 installation titled *Postal Consignments* at the SC Gallery in Zagreb. According to Ivana Bago, rather than “offer local, peripheral Yugoslav audiences examples of the latest international trends, Koščević intervened with a critique of what he saw as conceptual art's self-annulling complicity with commodification and institutional validation of art and artists.”⁽⁵⁶⁾ The series of exhibitions *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *Ics*, installed by Jarosław Kozłowski at Foksal Gallery, Warsaw between 1972 and 1974, although focused on the nature of linguistic and visual representation and the relationship between image and textual description, can still be considered examples of “meta-exhibitions,” since they also interrogated viewership, the formation of meanings and the representational function of the exhibition space. They are not mere replicas of conceptual art interventions on the symbolic structure of the gallery space, the kind Michael Asher performed, nor mere exercises in self-reflexivity as performed by Joseph Kosuth, but autonomous reflections on the politics of vision and reception, as well as structural interventions on the concept of representation meant to interrogate the possibility of achieving artistic and aesthetic autonomy.

Besides the above-mentioned clearly conceptual attitudes, the series of exhibitions installed at Foksal Gallery by artists such as Włodzimierz Borowski, Grzegorz Kowalski or Edward Krasinski at the end of the 1960s is also worth remembering.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Such exhibitions also included the participation of the audience and borrowed theatrical elements which reflected on the conditions and limitations of the exhibition space and artistic reception. Together with Tadeusz Kantor they conceived the exhibition as an art installation and stripped it away from the modernist conventions of the plinth or the picture frame which separated the artworks from the audience and the exhibition space. Foksal Gallery's activities were more precisely theorized by Wieslaw Borowski, Hanna Ptaszkowska, and Mariusz Tchorek in a poetic mode in "An Introduction to a General Theory of Place."⁽⁵⁸⁾ "The place" replaced the term exhibition, suggesting the indistinction between the exhibition site and the artist's studio as a space for presenting ideas in the process of materialization. Thus, it challenged the authoritarian structure of the modernist exhibition which claimed a false transparency and subsumed the artworks on display to an overall institutional discursive function.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Such ideas manifest obvious connections with the critique of institutions as authoritarian apparatuses developed elsewhere. For instance, Krasinski's straight lines of blue Scotch tape installed horizontally at the height of 130 cm that traversed spaces, crossing over objects and

- 57 See, for instance, *The Second Syncretic Show* of Włodzimierz Borowski (1966), Grzegorz Kowalski's environment *The Pocket* (1968) or Edward Krasinski's December 1966 exhibition where he narrowed the space of the gallery by building a labyrinth-like corridor into it. In the Polish context, one could also add Jerzy Beres' performative action *Prophecy II* at Krzysztofory Gallery (March 1, 1968).
- 58 Wieslaw BOROWSKI – Hanna PTASZKOWSKA – Mariusz TCHOREK, "Introduction to a General Theory of Place," in: Laura HOPTMAN – Tomáš POSPISZYL (eds.), *Primary Documents. A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art 2002, pp. 88–92.
- 59 Pawel POLIT, "Can One Be Late for the End of the History of Foksal Gallery?," in: Karolina LABOWICZ-DYMANUS (ed.), *We See You. The Foksal Gallery's Activities 1966–1989*, Tallin: Museum of Modern Art 2009, p. 20.

people and unifying environments, can be compared with Daniel Buren's interrogation of the gallery space performed after 1968 by means of serial vertical stripes, studying the relation between viewership, power, architecture, and public space. These initial premises posited the model of the "exhibition-as-work," against which one could assess Tadeusz Kantor's "anti-exhibition" practices, based on environments and happenings, whose roots can be found in his *Popular Exhibition* at Krzysztofory Gallery in Krakow in 1963, where Kantor theorized the exhibition as an active space.⁽⁶⁰⁾

Meta-exhibitions were often accompanied by innovative formats of presentation which may be included in the category of anti-exhibitions – the innovative use of the windows of the communal Hosiery Express Repair shop in Bratislava for the display of the works of Július Koller and Peter Bartoš in 1968–1969 or the *1st Open Studio* organized by Rudolf Sikora in his apartment in Bratislava on November 19, 1970.⁽⁶¹⁾ Another example is the exhibition *At the Moment*, casually organized by Nena and Branco Dimitrijević in a hall-gate of an ordinary apartment house in Frankopanska street No. 2a in Zagreb in April 1971.⁽⁶²⁾ While many other examples might be offered in this category,⁽⁶³⁾ it is vital to point out not only that such activities were triggered by the search for artistic autonomy, by-passing the intervention of cultural authorities, but also that

- 60 Pawel POLIT, "Foksal Gallery and the Notion of Archive: Between Inventory and Place," *Afterall*, 2009, issue 21, <https://www.afterall.org/articles/foksal-gallery-and-the-notion-of-archive-between-inventory-and-place/> (accessed on October 29, 2023).
- 61 GRUŃ, "Species of Exhibition Spaces."
- 62 Nena Dimitrijević, quoted in David SENIOR, "Scenes from Zagreb: Artists' Publications of the New Art Practice," https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/ScenesFromZagreb/?_ga=2.4995255.50577273.1698564319-634979514.1698403254 (accessed on October 28, 2023).
- 63 For the Czech Republic see, for instance, MORGANOVÁ – NEKVINDOVÁ – SVATOŠOVÁ, *Výstava jako médium*. For the Romanian context see Cristian NAE, "Basements, Attics, Streets and Courtyards: the Reinvention of Marginal Art Spaces in Romania during Socialism," in: Katalin CSEH-VARGA – Adam CZIRAK (eds.), *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere: Event-Based Art in Late Socialist Europe*, London – New York: Routledge 2018, pp. 75–88.

such ordinary spaces expanded the presentation formats towards disruptive public interventions and site-specific art installations.

Another category of exhibitions that needs to be contextualized is tentatively named, after López, “exhibitions as encounters.” This includes, for example, the *Meeting of Czech, Slovak and Hungarian artists* at Balatonboglár in 1972 or *Symposium ‘74*,⁽⁶⁴⁾ characterized by collaborative works and performance-based pieces subsumed under the premises of transnational solidarity and artistic sociality. Such encounters among artists collapsed the distinction between the studio as a site of experimentation and the educational para-institution as a process of collective and collaborative learning. While some of these events were meant to be opportunities to meet like-minded artists from other countries and initiate possible future collaborations and cultural exchanges beyond the state-supported framework of cultural diplomacy, they were also often viewed as self-organized opportunities to collaborate between experimental artists from the same country. A notable particularity of such performance-based and dialogical exhibitions is that their documentation in the form of posters also replaces the walls of the exhibition space and functions both as a catalog and as a mobile, circulating, and easy to reproduce space for display.

One should further interrogate the category of exhibitions as social and scientific laboratories. This category could include discursive exhibitions, in which theorizing about art replaced its presentation, such as *Seminars of the Group 143* that took place at SC Gallery Belgrade (1973). It may also include spatial environments that intersected

64 The Meeting of Czech, Slovak and Hungarian artists was organized by Hungarian art historian Laszlo Beké at György Galántai’s Chapel Studio, Balatonboglár on August 26, 1972. *Symposion ‘74* was held on February 28, 1974 in Bratislava. Participants and organizers included: Peter Bartoš, Robert Cyprich, Hervé Fischer, Stano Filko, Miloš Laky, Ján Zavarský, Viliam Jakubík, Juraj Meliš, Katarína Orlik, Rudolf Sikora, Dezider Tóth, Jana Želibská.

art and science, like the performative and processual exhibition *I Lived 130 days with a Sunflower*, installed by Romanian artist Ștefan Bertalan at Kalinderu Gallery, Bucharest in 1979. In the exhibition, Bertalan read texts, meditated and cherished a sunflower plant in an environment populated with biology-inspired drawings, expanding his earlier experiments in the intersection between art and natural science. Sometimes, as in the above-mentioned example, such exhibitions transformed the gallery space into an artist’s studio. In Poland, theorizing about art and its intersection with science was an integral part of the activities of Foksal Gallery as well as of other galleries such as Akumulatory in Poznan, which regularly scheduled public lectures. Collective workshops that attempted to bring together art, science and technology included *Art in the Changing World* organized by the critic Jerzy Ludwiński and held at Zakłady Azotowe in Puławy in 1966 – which took advantage of the socialist attempts to channel artistic innovation in the service of industrial advancement. Such examples expanded the exhibition as a site of presentation of artworks into an activity of knowledge production and experiential learning.

In all these types of exhibitions, more than the resonance with other major conceptual and performative events exhibited in Western Europe is noticeable; in an attempt to challenge the centrality and exceptionality of exhibitions such as *When Exhibitions become Form* or *Op Loose Shreeven* in exhibition histories⁽⁶⁵⁾ most of the relevant works, such as Bruce Altshuler’s *Exhibitions that Made Art History*,⁽⁶⁶⁾ focused mainly on a Western canon of exhibitions with some biennials of the Global South included in the narrative. It is not only in the wake of exhibitions such as the famous *Number Shows* series of exhibitions (the

65 Christian RATTEMAYER et. al, *Exhibiting the New Art: “Op Losse Schroeven” and “When Attitudes Become Form”* 1969, London: Afterall Books 2010.

66 Bruce ALTSHULER, *Biennials and Beyond: Exhibitions that Made Art History* 1962–2002, London: Phaidon 2013.

first installed by Lucy Lippard in 1969) and Kynaston Mc. Shine's 1970's MoMA *Information*, but also of proliferating mail art exhibitions and assembling magazines throughout the world, and in response to the various types of liberties and political constraints active in each country, that the exhibition spaces expanded in Eastern Europe and Latin America to include unconventional formats such as the print, the magazine, the performative and participative event and the site-specific installation art as exhibition. However, they responded to the need to establish parallel, autonomous and artistically self-managed cultural infrastructures and enable the circulation of artistic ideas and projects beyond national borders in times of strict political control.

Equally important is the dialogue that these exhibitions enable today with those that are manifested in various geographical spaces belonging to different modernities, sharing similar ontological features, albeit manifested in a different chronotope, and which, crucially in my opinion, look back at us from a different "margin." Unlike some of their Latin American counterparts with whom they shared a didactic and emancipatory scope (such as Graciela Carnevale's 1968 *Acción del encierro* from Rosario setup as part of the exhibition series *Ciclo del Arte Experimental* of the Grupo de Arte de Vanguardia), performative and participatory exhibitions such as *The Exhibition of Women and Men* did not extend towards the public sphere as a political composition to be challenged as much as towards the continuation of macro-politics within the institutional relations and aesthetic forms, in a way that evokes Jacques Rancière's "politics of aesthetics."⁽⁶⁷⁾ Challenging the separation between the public and the artistic representation, they confronted the aesthetics of realism, contesting the distinctions between "high" and "low" culture and the

67 Jacques RANCIÈRE, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, London: Continuum 2014.

separation between art and life, while retaining the collective, participatory and egalitarian form shared with the socialist organization of labor and the particular praxis of self-management prevailing in Yugoslavia under Tito. Last, but not least, such exhibitions challenged the authoritative model of the curator established by Western European curators as exhibition authors (or makers), expanding the exhibition as an artistic medium in which artists reinvented the exhibition form, its modes of address and the collaborative modes of production – a format that Elena Filipovic considers to be among the most striking and influential in the history of exhibitions.⁽⁶⁸⁾

Instead of Conclusions

The performative aspect of experimental art exhibitions in Central and Eastern Europe that I have attempted to roughly sketch out in this text impels them to acquire a locally distinct aspect. Performativity, collectivity, and self-reflexivity, as key attributes of such exhibitions, are similar to other exhibition practices in Western Europe or Latin America, although these working strategies were developed as a response to specific institutional configurations and to contingent material and political constraints. Therefore, it might be more productive to approach them as events rather than as representations.

Approached from this situated perspective, it becomes perhaps obvious that the exhibition becomes what Mieke Bal defined as a theoretical object – not a passive object on which predetermined theories should be projected, but cultural events that force us to theorize, think not only *about them*, but also *with them* and *through them*.⁽⁶⁹⁾ They

68 Elena FILIPOVIC, "When Exhibitions Become Form: On the History of the Artist as Curator," in: Lucy STEEDS (ed.), *Exhibition*, Cambridge MA – London: The MIT Press – Whitechapel Gallery 2014, p. 159.

69 Mieke BAL, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art Writing*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2001.

propose, therefore, a historiographic model that would be open, malleable and dialectic, oscillating between the past and the present instead of attempting to fix images and meanings within a given, past time, an unfinished historiography which lays bare the process of becoming visible and coming together in public by paying attention to the photographic documents, archival sources and raw materials used in reconstructing exhibitions, instead of “disciplining” them under a totalizing narrative. For Lucy Steeds, the notion of “becoming public” is also a key for defining an exhibition⁽⁷⁰⁾ – since it is the very process through which the exhibitionary and the curatorial performatively coalesce to intervene in the composition of the public and the constituency of the public domain.

Performativity may be broadly transferred to exhibitions organized by institutional structures engaged in international cultural relations through the transpositional work of the exhibition as a cultural practice. As privileged sites of constellating objects open to the public, exhibitions in Central and Eastern Europe regain agency. They intervene in the politics of publicity and discursive practices active at a certain moment in a specific geographic space as a vector of mobility and displacement. Therefore, they are often embedded within the study of transnational circulations of objects and of artistic exchanges and behave like key political agents and often mediate the construction of collective identity. Thus, the exhibition history implicitly becomes a fragment of the history of art and society, and, as such, it is open to a transregional comparative study, decentering even more the global art historical narrative and opening it up towards “alterglobalist”⁽⁷¹⁾ approaches that, as the *Transmissions* exhibition explicitly claimed,

70 Lucy STEEDS, “Introduction / Contemporary Exhibitions: Art at Large in the World,” in: STEEDS, *Exhibition*, pp. 13–15.

71 Piotr PIOTROWSKI, “From Global to Alter-Globalist Art History,” *Teksty Drugie*, 2015, issue 1, pp. 112–134.

suggest meaningful “counter-geographies,” and envisage “alter-canons.”⁽⁷²⁾

In researching the entangled trajectories of artists and curators that can be revealed by focusing on exhibition histories in Central and Eastern Europe, to open a future prospect that would surpass the narratives that limit themselves to supplementing existing, nationally focused art historical narratives, it is crucial to denounce the obsession with primacy, originality, and belatedness, which are simply transferred from modernist art history alongside the canon – a notion that, despite coming under intense scrutiny, seems to stubbornly return. This would enable us to work with horizontal temporal cuts in an expanded cultural field. I have attempted to propose a model for such a temporal framework in the present study, focusing on the period between 1969 and 1972 in Central and Eastern Europe, and broadening the spatial framework to include some very famous examples of Latin American and North American art experimental exhibitions. Refining this model, in searching the history of exhibitions from the 1970s, for instance, one may look for the interference among, for instance, locally produced art theories (the kinds of theories that art critics and theorists such as Jerzy Ludwiński, Tomáš Štrauss, Laszlo Beké, Carlfriedrich Claus or Andrzej Kostolowski, or artists such as Jerzy Bereś, Dunja Blažević, Andrzej Partum, Paul Neagu, Jerzy Rosolowicz, Ewa Partum or Tadeusz Kantor devised in Eastern Europe), as they were reflected in some of the exhibitions I have mentioned above. Key conceptual art writing of the time from the region,⁽⁷³⁾ translations from other writers that were

72 Miriam OESTERREICH – Kristian HANDBERG, “Alter-canons and Alter-gardes – Formations and Reformations of Art Historical Canons in Contemporary Exhibitions: The Case of Latin American and Eastern European Art,” *Journal of Art Historiography*, 2018, issue 19, pp. 1–20.

73 See, for instance, this anthology of writings by artists: Dóra HEGYI – Zsuzsa LÁSZLÓ – Emese SÜVECZ – Agnes SZANYI (eds.), *Art Always Has its Consequences. Artists’ Texts from Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Serbia 1947–2009*, Berlin: Sternberg Press 2011.

circulating, and political writing relevant for each national situation form another constellation of sources that may be used in constructing the “context” for each exhibition under study.

At the same time, to understand the emergence of such exhibition forms and media, one must investigate not only the elasticity of the media of sculpture, photography, but also of media like graphic arts or textiles, and their effects on envisaging exhibitions as environments, publics as living sculptures and agents, and visual display as one among many aesthetic communicative technologies. Notable studies published mainly in the *October* journal have defined the effects of the neo-avantgarde as a Western phenomenon from the perspective of media expansion and lay out the foundation for a general theory of postmodernism as an effect of these structural changes in artistic production that took place in the 1960s and 1970s.⁽⁷⁴⁾ Several exhibitions from Eastern Europe (as well as others from Latin America) reveal ways in which the media of graphic arts and photography have been expanded due to different cultural policies, political environments and institutional configurations outside Western cultural contexts and beyond the Eurocentric, teleological history of modernism. Some well-known examples include biennials that connected former socialist spaces such as the Ljubljana Graphic Art Biennial, the Krakow Print Biennial etc.⁽⁷⁵⁾ Others include mail art exhibitions such as those organized in Latin America by Clemente Padín at Gallery U in Montevideo, Uruguay in 1974, by Ismael Assumpção at Caixas College in São Paulo, Brazil in 1975 (*The First Internationale of Mail Art*) and by

What is at Stake in Writing Art
History through Exhibition Histories
in East-Central Europe?

74 See, for instance: Rosalind KRAUSS, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October*, 1979, issue 8, pp. 30–44; Hal FOSTER, “What’s Neo about the Neo-Avantgarde?,” *October*, 1994, issue 70, pp. 5–32; Douglas CRIMP, “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,” *October*, 1980, issue 15, pp. 91–101; Benjamin H. D. BUCHLOH, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October*, 1990, issue 55, pp. 105–143.

75 VIDEKANIC, *Nonaligned Modernism*.

Horacio Zabala and Eduardo Antonio Vigo at New Gallery in Buenos Aires, Argentina three months later, organized in non-conventional spaces and formats, and many others organized in Eastern Europe by Robert Rehfeldt, Pawel Petasz or György Galántai several years later. Exhibitions of this kind not only flew under the radar of canonical exhibition histories, but they may also be read from the perspective of a socialist postcolonial aesthetics, or in the framework of a trans-peripheral modernism.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge why such a study would be relevant to the present moment we stand in, looking at the past. Besides the exhibition as an expanded medium, embedded in unconventional forms of communication and documentation, and its experimental blurring of the boundaries between media and representational formats, one can sense in the current lingering interest in the 1960s–1970s exhibitions in Central and Eastern Europe a nostalgia for a different possible form of sociality and a different structure of the art field. Such attempts to reshape the boundaries of the art field and the social interactions facilitated by the exhibition form were formulated in Western Europe in the 1990s by ground-breaking exhibitions of relational art curated by Nicolas Bourriaud, or the collective and experimental exhibitions such as H.U.O’s *Laboratory* or *do it*.⁽⁷⁶⁾ However, the history of similar events occurring in East Central Europe in the heyday of the neo-avant-gardes – despite their notable differences in terms of political contexts of production, artistic

76 Set up in CAPC Musée d’art Contemporain, Bordeaux, France in 1996, *Traffic* is regarded as one of the landmark exhibitions of relational art curated by Nicolas Bourriaud, showcasing 30 artists interested in (re)shaping human relations. *Laboratorium* was curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Barbara Vanderlinden at the Provinciaal Museum voor Fotografie and in various sites in Antwerp, Belgium in 1999, bringing together artists and scientists to compare the similarities in their working processes and interconnect the laboratorium and the studio through the shared notion of “experimentation.” Initiated in 1994, *do it* is an ongoing exhibition with more than 90 iterations in multiple cities, whose main process of production is based on instructions sent by various artists which can be creatively interpreted and materialized by the participating public.

motivations and cultural constraints – passes unacknowledged by exhibition historians such as Jens Hoffmann.⁽⁷⁷⁾ Studying exhibitions such as *Works and Worlds, I AM* and *Actual Art in Eastern Europe* may also prove significant to assess other contemporary landmark exhibitions such as *Interpol*, curated by Jan Åman and Viktor Misiano at the Färgfabriken in Stockholm in 1993, from the perspective of misunderstandings and failed encounters between Western and East European Artists in a *longue durée*.

From the perspective of the present, I also believe that we may find in such exhibitions a challenge to the already commodified, distributed tasks of curatorial activity within the capitalist knowledge-production. This challenge lies in frequently exchanging positions between curators who act as artists and artists who act as curators, as well as in collective curating and in collaborative forms of artistic production – which are also missing from surveys focused mainly on Western modernism.⁽⁷⁸⁾ The latter are yet to be interrogated according to the notion of intellectual solidarity, as well as from the perspective of affect theory that may illuminate the triggers and collective effects of the actions and performative interaction that took place during the above-mentioned artists' meetings or participatory exhibitions. As exhibition historians and theorists, it is, perhaps, our duty today to leave these potentialities open instead of collecting and archiving “minor” art exhibitions as another kind of commodifiable, exotic curiosity of the close or distant “other.”

77 Jens HOFFMANN, *Show Time: The Most Influential Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, London: Thames and Hudson 2017.

78 Alison GREEN, *When Artists Curate. Contemporary Art and the Exhibition as Medium*, London: Reaktion Books 2018.