Transnational Networks at Labirynth Gallery in Lublin and the Concept of Video Art as a Cultural Transfer

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Recently, theoretical assumptions and practical agendas of East-Central European post-war art history have been undergoing critical re-examination; new research perspectives, tools, and goals have been sought. Also, the rise and consolidation of authoritarian nationalisms across East-Central Europe has posed a dire challenge to the art historiography of the region. Among contemporary perspectives, the tradition of Cultural Transfer Approach (CTA), especially in its reconsidered form, seems to offer a comprehensive tool for re-orientation of art historiographic practice. I reappraise some of CTA's tenets in order to examine how it can help us tackle the mentioned dilemmas. This provides a starting point for surmounting the official/unofficial dichotomy which has been a founding presupposition of East-Central European art historiography. Finally, I test CTA's continuing relevance by showing how the introduction of the concept of video art to Poland in the mid-1970s can be interpreted in terms of cultural transfer. As part of more complex multilateral network flows, the transfer made its way back to the West in contributing to the emergence of two important East-West initiatives: the exhibition Works and Words (1979) and a network of cooperation and distribution in the field of video art called Infermental (1981–1991).

Keywords
cultural transfer – the "official" and the "unofficial" – video art – Labirynth Gallery – Józef Robakowski – exhibition *Works and Words* – project *Infermental*

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East-Central European post-war art history as a field of study that emerged and self-emancipated after 2000 in line with the paradigm of "horizontality" is today at a crossroads. For several years now, its theoretical assumptions and practical agendas have been undergoing critical re-examination, and new research perspectives, tools, and goals have been sought actively, if not feverishly.[1] Developments in other research fields and disciplines in the humanities and social sciences and a growing transdisciplinary tendency to analyze an ever-expanding list of phenomena in global terms and ties have exerted considerable pressure on how the history of artistic practices is approached. On the other hand, the re-awakening, rise, and consolidation of populist, soft authoritarian nationalisms across East-Central Europe as part of a global right-wing backlash has posed a dire challenge that the art historiography of the region, with its localist agenda and counter-hegemonic critique turned against the hierarchical supremacy and the particularist universalism of the West, simply cannot avoid. On the contrary, it must respond to this challenge in a self-transforming fashion.

Among contemporary research perspectives, the tradition of the so-called Cultural Transfer Approach (CTA), especially in its current, reconsidered form, seems to offer a comprehensive tool for the re-integration and re-orientation of art historiographic practice. In this article, I reappraise some of CTA's theoretical tenets in order to examine how it can help us tackle the general methodological and political dilemmas mentioned above. I also argue

1 Although the term "horizontality" was Piotr Piotrowski's coinage and belongs to his "horizontal art history" project, I am using it here to encompass the entirety of the field of East-Central European art history in its emergent and early development phase because it seems to aptly capture the field's counter-hegemonic and egalitarian agenda. For a panorama of critical revisions of East-Central European art historiography and Piotrowski's legacy in particular, see: Beata HOCK – Anu ALLAS (eds.), *Globalizing East European Art Histories. Past and Present*, New York: Routledge 2018; and Agata JAKUBOWSKA – Magdalena RADOMSKA (eds.), *Horizontal Art History and Beyond. Revising Peripheral Critical Practices*, New York: Routledge 2023.

that it provides, on a more specific level, a starting point for surmounting the dichotomy of the "official" and "unofficial" which has been a founding presupposition of post-war East-Central European art historiography. Finally, I attempt to demonstrate CTA's continuing relevance by applying it to a short case study and showing how the introduction of the generic concept of video art to Poland in the mid-1970s can be interpreted in terms of cultural transfer.

Cultural transfer and the transnational – the many shades of the concepts

When CTA was created in the 1980s[2] to reconsider cross-cultural processes in their multiple forms, dynamic trajectories, and complex effects, it targeted not only the paradigm of static comparative analysis, but also the traditional notions of cultural relations, circulations, exchanges, or influences as vague ideas that lacked conceptual rigor and were devoid of sufficient methodological foundations. Already at this early stage, the new perspective turned against the diffusionist model, which assumes the unilateral influence of a stronger culture on a weaker one. Therefore, it also aimed at subverting the dichotomic and hierarchical account of center-periphery relationships. By prioritizing the context of reception of foreign elements, CTA was able to focus on the active transformation of the function and meaning of any artifact circulating between different cultural systems. It began to pay attention not only to the specificity and agency of geographical, social, and cultural spaces in which transfers take place but also, and increasingly, to the very process of transmission and its various agents: cultural "transmitters," "mediators" or "brokers,"

2 Michael ESPAGNE – Michel WERNER, "Deutsch-französischer Kulturtransfer im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert. Zu einem neuen interdisziplinären Forschungsprogramm des C.N.R.S.," *Francia. Forschungen zur westeuropäischen Geschichte*, Vol. 13, 1985, No. 15, pp. 502–510, especially pp. 504–506.

which can be individual people, material objects, media, or institutions.[3]

In its elaborate version, CTA includes a number of aspects that characterize transference: the departure point of the transfer – its resource rather than source;[4] the object of the transfer in its materiality and meanings; different phases and trajectories of the very process of transference; a demand for active reception of the transferred content; the subjects of the reception and their underlying motivations; transformative and creative adaptation and resemanticization (change of meaning) of the transferred content; human and non-human actors (artistic, institutional, material, infrastructural, etc.) mediating the process; wider contextual factors (historical, social, political, economic, cultural, technical, etc.) which make the transfer possible; the effectivity of the positive transfer (its scale, scope, and short-term or long-term consequences), or the ineffectivity of the negative one; and, last but not least, the feedback impact of the counter-transfer on the resource.[5] Despite this comprehensiveness, CTA scholars claim that it "has not developed into a general theory applicable everywhere. On the contrary, it is rather a key for the discovery of new research constellations, open for investigation and appropriation."[6]

3 Steen Bille JØRGENSEN – Hans-Jürgen LÜSEBRINK, "Introduction: Reframing the Cultural Transfer Approach," in: Steen Bille JØRGENSEN – Hans-Jürgen LÜSEBRINK (eds.), *Cultural Transfer Reconsidered. Transnational Perspectives, Translation Processes, Scandinavian and Postcolonial Challenges*, Brill: Leiden 2021, pp. 1–4.

4 For the distinction between "source" and "resource" in this context, see Beata HOCK, "Managing Trans/Nationality. Cultural Actors across Imperial Structures," in: HOCK – ALLAS, *Globalizing East*, p. 47. While the notion of source privileges the departure point of the transfer, that of resource confers more agency on the transfer recipient.

5 JØRGENSEN – LÜSEBRINK, "Introduction: Reframing," pp. 2–13; Dominik PICK, "Czym jest transfer kultury? Transfer kultury a metoda porównawcza. Możliwości zastosowania *transferts culturels* na gruncie polskim," in: Mirosława ZIELIŃSKA – Marek ZYBURA (eds.), *Monolog, dialog, transfer. Relacje kultury polskiej i niemieckiej w XIX i XX wieku*, Wrocław: Centrum Willy'ego Brandta 2013, pp. 256–257.

6 Antje DIETZE – Matthias MIDDEL, "Intercultural Transfers," in: Mathias MIDDEL (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Transregional Studies*, New York – London: Routledge 2019, p. 64.

I share this view, and I think that the CTA could be effectively appropriated for art historiographical purposes as well.[7] It can be a tool for assembling a methodological constellation that would reintegrate several important areas of research on East-Central European art. These aspects include (but are not limited to): the reconsideration of center-periphery relations and attempts to go beyond them; the research into the specificity of local artistic cultures; their comparative or parallel analysis; the tracing of networks of contacts and exchanges; artistic mobility and migration studies; the study of the materiality of artifacts; the history of art institutions; exhibition histories; art reception analysis; and finally, the study of infrastructures and various conditions (economic, social, cultural, and political) of artistic production. As their common framework, CTA promises to link the fragmentary perspectives and reorient them towards a transmethodological or synthetic account which would be more faithful to the metamorphic dynamics, actual richness, and complexity of artistic processes considered fundamentally transborder phenomena.

In order for CTA to become such an integrative framework, some of its assumptions, especially those from an early stage of its evolution, require critical re-examination. In recent years, though, substantial efforts have been made to reconsider such problematic tenets, and these new developments provide us with important insights into how CTA should be reconfigured. I would like to focus on two interconnected aspects that raise strong objections and are in particular need of transformation. One is the assumption that the transfer takes place between two

7 For an earlier attempt at positioning CTA among methodological resources for art historiography as a study of "circulations," see Thomas DACOSTA KAUFMANN – Catherine DOSSIN – Béatrice JOYEUX-PRUNEL, "Introduction. Reintroducing Circulations: Historiography and the Project of Global Art History," in: Thomas DACOSTA KAUFMANN – Catherine DOSSIN – Béatrice JOYEUX-PRUNEL (eds.), *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, New York – London: Routledge 2015, p. 10. The volume also features a text by one of CTA's co-founders: Michel ESPAGNE, "Cultural Transfers in Art History," in: *Ibid.*, pp. 97–112.

nation-states, national cultures, or territories. In its current advancements, CTA no longer entertains the idea of unilateral, or bilateral and symmetric transfers. Instead, it tends to proceed in terms of networks and perceives a singular transfer of an artifact as already implicating several cultures that are often connected by asymmetric relations of power. The network approach is also applied to the analysis of cultural mediators, which are not considered point-like entities but rather meshworks or assemblages.[8] Taking this into account, it would be possible to go one step further and speak of "network transfers" or "multilateral cultural flows." What is more, such network-based thinking has also impacted the very notion of national culture on which CTA is based. Not only have the nation and culture been put into question as autonomous and homogeneous entities, but their very bond of synonymy has been loosened, if not broken. Culture is now seen as open, fluid, and multi-scalar, with changing and permeable borders. As a result, cross-cultural transfers are considered to emerge between territories, fields, places, or networks that are not simply, directly, and necessarily bound to the national.[9] The notions of culture, nation, and area or territory cease to perfectly overlap, but their very disjuncture and divergence indicate that they can still maintain different and changing relations.

The other problematic aspect of CTA that I want to discuss is also closely related to the questions of the nation, nation-state, and national culture, and it concerns what has been called "methodological nationalism." It is "an intellectual orientation that approaches the study of social and historical processes as if they were contained within

8 JØRGENSEN – LÜSEBRINK, "Introduction: Reframing," pp. 4–7.
9 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

the borders of individual nation-states."[10] This "container methodology"[11] not only ignores a variety of internal differences within each nation-state or ethnic population, but it also presumes, if only implicitly and unwillingly, the nation-centered lens as the main or only relevant unit of historical, sociological, or cultural analysis. In addition to naturalizing nation-states and national history as the unit of analysis and confining empirical data collection to the territory of a particular state, it tends to omit nationalism and pretend not to see its presence in contemporary social life.[12] This means that such a methodological position, implicit in writing isolationist national art histories or confining the cross-border analysis to relations between separate nation-states, runs the risk of playing into the hands of actual social, ethnic, and political nationalism.

The concept of the transnational has emerged precisely in an attempt to question the nation-centered approach and transcend it. Its aim is not to negate the significance of the nation-state but to present it as a non-exclusive framework of study and use it as one of a few dynamically related and intersecting scales of analysis.[13] But above all, it is meant to shape and direct empirical research on connections, mobilities, identities, networks, movements, organizations, institutions, etc. that extend beyond and operate across (below, above, beside, etc.) state borders. The cross-border relations in question are multilateral and multidirectional since they

10 Nina Glick SCHILLER, "Transnationality, Migrants and Cities: A Comparative Approach," in: Anna AMELINA – Devrimsel D. NERGIZ – Thomas FAIST – Nina Glick SCHILLER (eds.), *Beyond Methodological Nationalism. Research Methodologies for Cross-Border Studies*, New York: Routledge 2012, p. 29.
11 Anna AMELINA – Devrimsel D. NERGIZ – Thomas FAIST – Nina Glick SCHILLER, "Methodological Predicaments of Cross-Border Studies," in: AMELINA – NERGIZ – FAIST – SCHILLER, *Beyond Methodological Nationalism*, p. 4.
12 *Ibid.*, p. 2. See also Andreas WIMMER – Nina Glick SCHILLER, "Methodological nationalism and the study of migration," *European Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 43, 2002, No. 2, pp. 219–226.
13 AMELINA – NERGIZ – FAIST – SCHILLER, "Methodological Predicaments," pp. 2–5.

> constitute networks that connect individuals or groups of people located in several specific nation-states. Those who engage in a set of such relations constitute a transnational social field defined as a network of networks of unequal power that link individuals to one or more institutions that organize and regulate the daily economic, political, cultural, and religious activities of social life.[14]

According to this model, the world primarily consists of multiple sets of dynamically related, partially overlapping, and interacting transnational social fields that create secondary nation-bordered and bounded structures, acts, and processes,[15] while nationalization itself becomes more of a process of reappropriation of such transnational dynamics. The transnational, therefore, is not to be imagined as a static map with points in different countries or regions, but rather as a dynamic that involves "conduits, intersections, circuits, and articulations" and operates "at mobile, interlocking scales."[16]

Since its invention in the early 1970s, the concept of the "transnational" has been defined in terms of non-state cross-border connections and interactions and contrasted with the concept of the "international," which has been, in turn, reserved for activities between nation-states.[17] An important terminological addenda occurred in the late 1990s, when a differentiation between transnationalism "from below" and "from above" was introduced, the former encompassing counter-hegemonic grassroots activities of ordinary people (individuals, informal groups, etc.), and the

14 SCHILLER, "Transnationality, Migrants," p. 25.
15 Chiara DE CESARI – Ann RIGNEY, "Introduction," in: Chiara DE CESARI – Ann RIGNEY (eds.), *Transnational Memory. Circulation, Articulation, Scales*, Berlin: De Gruyter 2014, p. 5.
16 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
17 Steven VERTOVEC, *Transnationalism*, New York: Routledge 2009, pp. 3, 28–29.

latter regarding hegemonic forces of global capital, media, political institutions, etc.[18] However, the two dimensions or directions are not to be treated as oppositional but as entangled aspects of phenomena that include, among others, transnational social formations, sites of political engagement, flows of capital, migration processes, various types of diaspora consciousness, and modes of cultural and artistic production.[19]

Even though the concept of transnationalism has played a major role in attempts to leave methodological nationalism behind, it has sometimes been criticized for doing the opposite. As it still keeps a reference, in its lexical and conceptual structure, to the very thing it seeks to question, namely the nation, and may project an image of a primarily national "container," which is transcended, it reintroduces, privileges, and reinforces the national lens.[20] This claim seems partly justified, not only for conceptual but also empirical reasons. Nationalism itself is a transnational phenomenon, as there are common frameworks of emergence, operation, and alliance for particular nationalisms, and contemporary nationalization processes are often supported and facilitated by transnational actors, institutional or otherwise.[21]

There are two-fold conclusions to be drawn from this when trying to include the concept of the transnational into CTA, to which it seems, at first glance, perfectly suited. Firstly, it is not enough to talk solely in terms of "transnational transfers" to guard one's position against nationalism, either methodological or ethno-political. The very content of the transfer is also important. Secondly,

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 29. The distinction was introduced in Sarah J. MAHLER, "Theoretical and Empirical Contributions. Toward a Research Agenda for Transnationalism," in: Michael Peter SMITH – Luis Eduardo GUARNIZO (eds.), *Transnationalism from Below*, New York: Routledge 1998, pp. 64–100.
19 VERTOVEC, *Transnationalism*, pp. 4–12.
20 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
21 *Ibid.*, p. 17–18.

the concept could be, in certain cases, supplemented or replaced with other terms that put into relief different aspects of transfer processes and, when necessary, introduce the question of the nation or nationalization as one of them. Apart from "transregional" or "transcontinental," which relate to different scales, and "transcultural," with its own tradition of disengaging culture from the constraints of the nation-state,[22] such terms include "trans-state" and "cross-border." Their additional advantage is that they point out the material apparatuses of the state and its territorial administration, and these have been, after all, among the main obstacles to overcome by all those who ever wanted to act "transnationally." In order to bracket the question of state borders, terms like "translocal," "cross-place," and "multi-sited" may also provide useful alternatives. A further move away from the nation-state would entail experimenting with new terminological inventions, for example, "transnetwork," "trans-circuit," or even "transassemblage," as they do not imply container-like structures.

In the field of East-Central European post-war art historiography, it is Piotr Piotrowski's book *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, and more precisely, its two chapters: "1989: The Spatial Turn" and "From Geography to Topography,"[23] which have been counted and referenced among the most prominent attempts to introduce the concept of the transnational into the analysis of artistic practices under state socialism. It is also worth

22 For a useful and critical overview of the concept of the transcultural, see Daniel G. KÖNIG – Katja RAKOW, "The Transcultural Approach Within a Disciplinary Framework: An Introduction," *Transcultural Studies*, Vol. 7, 2016, no. 2, pp. 89–100; Christian KRAVAGNA, "When Routes Entered Culture: Histories and Politics of Transcultural Thinking," in: Karin GLUDOVATZ – Juliane NOTH – Joachim REES (eds.), *The Itineraries of Art. Topographies of Artistic Mobility in Europe and Asia*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink 2015, pp. 35–47; "Understanding Transculturalism. Monica Juneja and Christian Kravagna in Conversation," in: Moira HILLE – Christian KRAVAGNA – Marion von OSTEN (eds.), *Transcultural Modernisms*, Berlin: Sternberg Press 2013, pp. 22–33.

23 Piotr PIOTROWSKI, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, London: Reaktion Books 2012, pp. 15–79.

mentioning that although CTA was probably never part of Piotrowski's explicit theoretical or methodological resources, he often spoke of artistic "exchanges" and was determined to show how a foreign idea or practice is transformed by being actively received in a local context with its specific political circumstances and artistic traditions.[24] In effect, his position, even if more intuitive and less refined, seems to have been close to that of CTA, and his take on the transnational may be scrutinized as offering an insight into how the term could work when applied to artistic transfers.

On such closer examination, Piotrowski's account remains unsatisfying in at least three respects. Firstly, while he opposes "transnational" to "international," he confers on both terms diverse and inconsistent meanings that he does not seem to control. "International" is interpreted there as Western modernism's claim (ungrounded and falsely universalist in Piotrowski's view) to be "beyond" or "outside" national characteristics and identities, but it also refers, in a more conventional manner, to official relationships between nation-states in East-Central Europe during the socialist period.[25] "Transnational," in turn, retains its widely accepted meaning of going beyond the nation-state as it describes practices that attempted to break national isolation and cross borders between the states of the region. At the same time, it signifies national identity which is not lost in transcending the borders of its own nation-state but gains value since it is only in going beyond them that it can "see itself" and fully define itself as such.[26] When Piotrowski uses the term in this way, he applies it only to cross-border contacts and exchanges that stayed within

24 See for example *ibid.*, p. 70. See also Piotr PIOTROWSKI, *In the Shadow of Yalta. The Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, London: Reaktion Books 2009, particularly pp. 33–57, where his analysis of the active reception of Surrealism in different countries of East-Central Europe after World War II apparently comes close to CTA.

25 PIOTROWSKI, *Art and Democracy*, pp. 38, 70.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 70–74.

East-Central Europe. When they extended beyond the region, they are not described, contrary to what might be expected, as "transregional" but as "international."[27]

Secondly, and consequently, even though the concept of the transnational is explicitly introduced in the text to target nationalist implications, its actual employment does not guard it sufficiently from slipping into them again. The reason Piotrowski defines transnational practices as transmissions of a national identity beyond its state borders is that he tends, as part of his horizontal art history project, to define the local specificity of art practices in terms of their national identification.[28] In effect, he seems to hope that "transnational" would keep a reference to the national as a vehicle of local difference and a strategy of resistance to the hegemony of the universalist West, but at the same time, it would avoid essentializing the nation. To this end, he differentiates between "macro" and "micro" perspectives of horizontal art history and claims that while the former must defend the national subject, the latter necessitates its critique and a deconstruction of "the nation-subject in order to defend marginalized cultures of national minorities against the claims of the majorities."[29] Today, such a double practice seems no longer convincing and tenable as regards avoiding methodological and political nationalism, and it is doubtful whether it was ever effective in the way Piotrowski desired. Local specificity must instead be rethought outside the national lens, and a revised

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 71, 74. In this context, it is significant that the translator of Piotrowski's book, Anna Brzyski, has made a mistake or purposefully changed the text at the point where the concept of the transnational is applied to selected initiatives of Polish conceptual artist Jarosław Kozłowski. While the English version says that "Both NET and Gallery Acumulatory 2 functioned as regional transnational projects" (*Ibid.*, p. 71), the Polish original claims the opposite – see Piotr PIOTROWSKI, *Sztuka i demokracja w postkomunistycznej Europie*, Poznań: Rebis 2010, p. 74. What Piotrowski means to say is that the two initiatives managed to create networks that extended beyond the region of East-Central Europe and, therefore, should not be considered merely "transnational", but rather "international".

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 36–38, 75.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

understanding of the transnational, or altogether different units of analysis, is necessary.[30]

The final objection is to the fact that Piotrowski squeezes the concept of the transnational into the opposition between the "official" and the "unofficial," confining it to the latter. When he discusses transnational artistic exchanges within the region of East-Central Europe, he tends to focus exclusively on what he calls "independent" and "unofficial" artistic practices.[31] Even though he admits that the transnational cannot be reduced to them, he still stereotypically separates the "unofficial" from the "official," and, as a result, he does not notice that the two may be interconnected in the very examples of transnational initiatives that he himself evokes.[32]

For Piotrowski, the transnational perspective was ultimately a tool for a deconstruction of Western culture that would question its false universalism and pin it down to its particular local and national contexts.[33] However, it seems that such a usage of the transnational risks eliminating the universal as such and replacing it with a play of national particularities. In effect, it might unwillingly support isolationist nationalism and regionalism. Edit András in "What Does East-Central European Art History Want?," reflecting on the legacy of horizontal art history after Piotrowski's death, seems to suggest as much when she writes that

30 There is another concept in Piotrowski's text, namely "trans-cosmopolitanism", which focuses on connections and exchanges between cities and therefore could play the role of such a different unit of analysis. Piotrowski is hesitant to apply it to art practices of the socialist period (which should be studied in transnational terms), and he would rather reserve it for the post-1989 period with its global structures of artistic exchange. Nevertheless, he admits a bit further, in a short passage that "cities always had their own identities that did not always coincide with the national ones. This was also true during the communist period." *Ibid.*, p. 76.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 70–71.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 71, where Piotrowski discusses the "unofficial" initiative of Hungarian art historian János Brendel who organized an exhibition of Hungarian art in Poznań, at the local Bureau of Art Exhibitions, which was part of a network of "official" art venues in Poland.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

> one can no longer argue for the specificities of art and culture of the East-Central European region as a consequence of the different trajectory of its history, since this argument, even if only on its surface, resembles and partly overlaps with the rhetoric of the nationalist discourses and so could be mistakenly identified with them.[34]

Claiming that "the momentum for arguing for a regionalism with its specificities is simply gone," she concludes that "universal values must nowadays be defended and argued for."[35] I strongly support this view, and I concede that "what East-Central European art history wants" now is a new universalism. It should be a "concrete universalism" that allows for, includes, and exists in the plurality of singular occurrences and exceptions. Such an open, heterogeneous, and multidirectional "pluriversalism," or "singuniversalism," to draw here on notions that have been present in postcolonial and decolonial thought and the reflection on the global art world for almost two decades,[36] should embrace a multitude of translocal artistic cultures as a community that notwithstanding actual relations of power, hegemony, dominance, subjugation, resistance, and negotiation, consists in sharing, repurposing, and altering its circulating transfers. CTA

34 Edit ANDRÁS, "What Does East-Central European Art History Want? Reflections on the Art History Discourse in the Region Since 1989," in: Urška JURMAN – Christiane ERHARTER – Rawley GRAU (eds.), *Extending the Dialogue*, Ljubljana – Berlin – Vienna: Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory – Archive Books – Erste Foundation 2016, pp. 76–77.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 76.

36 See for example: Sabelo J. NDLOVU-GATSHENI, "A World Without Others? Specter of Difference and Toxic Identitarian Politics," *International Journal of Critical Diversity Studies*, Vol. 1, 2018, No. 1, pp. 80–96; Ramón GROSFOGUEL, "Decolonizing Western Uni-versalisms: Decolonial Pluri-versalism from Aimé Césaire to the Zapatistas," *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, Vol. 1, 2012, No. 3, pp. 88–104; Thierry de DUVE, "The Glocal and the Singuniversal. Reflections on Art and Culture in the Global World," *Third Text*, Vol. 21, 2007, No. 6, pp. 681–688.

does not seem to offer sufficient theoretical instruments for constructing this new universal perspective, but due to the kinds of empirical data it provides, it can certainly contribute to the emergence of a "pluriversalist" model in art historiography.

Official and unofficial in the expanded and transformed field[37]

As stated above, cultural transfers cannot be reduced to "unofficial" trans-state contacts and trajectories but often combine the "unofficial" with the "official," complicating the very dichotomy and entangling its poles. Both these terms, "official" and "unofficial," are notoriously vague and imprecise, and their opposition has proven time and again to be simplistic, rigid, and unable to account for the complexities of actual artistic ideas, practices, positions, or institutions. In order to go beyond the dichotomy and outline a more complex conceptual model, I will draw some general inspiration from Polish sociologist Andrzej Rychard's argument on "real communism" as a project of institutional modernization.[38]

Taking issues with both totalitarian and post-totalitarian approaches to actual state socialisms, Rychard interprets the People's Republic of Poland, with the possibility of extending the analysis onto the other countries of the socialist bloc, as an institutional regime or system that was made of mutually related and interlaced instances: formal state institutions, based on codified laws and explicit regulations, and

37 Obviously, the notion of the "expanded field" evokes the title of Rosalind Krauss' seminal essay (see Rosalind KRAUSS, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October*, Vol. 8, 1979, No. 1, pp. 30–44), and loosely draws on a subsequent tendency in art criticism and historiography to employ this term whenever concepts that appear too narrow and simplistic are replaced by more complex, multimodal, and multidirectional models.

38 Andrzej RYCHARD, "System instytucjonalny komunizmu: jak działał, zmieniał się i upadł," in: Witold MORAWSKI (ed.), *Modernizacja Polski. Struktury. Agencje. Instytucje*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne 2010, pp. 435–460.

actors who use these institutional structures and modify them by way of informal actions. As he explains,

> this perspective assumes a very broad concept of institutions and mechanisms of their creation: obviously, they comprise not only formal but also informal solutions, and "institutional initiative" is not limited to authorities and their apparatus but also includes ways in which people use institutions affecting their actual structure and functioning.[39]

This expanded concept of institutional systems is introduced in order to account for the internal contradictions of "real communism" as a regime whose formal solutions generated their informal negations but which continued reabsorbing and reintegrating them into one whole until it was no longer possible due to economic and social reasons. A crucial aspect of this perspective is that informal mechanisms are neither simply outside the communist system as an exception or opposition, nor are they fully integrated into it, controlled and disarmed by its omnipresent and dispersed powers. Both formal and informal elements were necessary for each other as one supplemented or compensated for what the other lacked, and their interlacing allowed the system to reproduce, develop, and modernize but also forced constant changes upon it.[40] The system tried to adjust to the changes and integrate them as long as it could, but eventually these integrative efforts were too costly, and it broke down. Rychard evokes two major examples of such complex and dynamic relationships: one is that of formal

39 *Ibid.*, p. 437; the translation of the quote is mine.

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 438–440. Rychard's analysis remains here too negative in so far as it reduces the modernization potentials of the communist system's formal mechanisms to its purely receptive and defensive aspects, and neglects to take into account its immanent modernization imperatives and initiatives.

and informal economies, and the other regards the mutual implication of top-down centralist state control over a presumed unified interest of society and the bottom-up divergent interests of different social segments, professional industries, or class groups.[41] They both can serve as useful analogies for rethinking the opposition between "official" and "unofficial" artistic cultures in East-Central Europe. They also provide wider contextual frameworks for the analysis of the region's art history in terms of intertwined formal/informal aspects of institutions, initiatives, and practices.

The intertwinement of the formal and the informal establishes a departure point for going beyond the official/unofficial dichotomy. At the same time, it becomes an exemplary part of the expanded and complex conceptual model I want to propose. It is an open, relational configuration in which the object of analysis – an artwork, practice, exhibition, event, institution, etc. – would be defined by an array of interconnected aspects and traits. The list of concepts I am offering here is by no means exhaustive and can be supplemented with other items:

formal – informal
mainstream – alternative
traditionalist – moderate modern – experimental
professional – young – amateur
public – semiprivate – private
legal – semilegal – illegal
capital – peripheral
aesthetic – sociocultural – political

"Formal" and "informal" are notions which seem to rewrite the official/unofficial dichotomy in the most direct way as they point out whether art-related practices are performed as explicitly codified procedures within rule-bound

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 438–439, 441–443, 446–450.

structures like registered institutions, or rather are based on unwritten and more flexible norms that can be stretched, modified or even transgressed. The second pair, "mainstream" and "alternative," can effectively re-orient our perspective when it comes to describing relative status, positions, or circuits of art phenomena. The two terms bring to the fore issues of relations and tensions, alliances and agonistics, hierarchies and exclusions that emerge from artistic cultures or milieus rather than are simply imposed on them by a decisive external factor, e.g., politics, economy, or social life. Similarly, the triad of "traditionalist," "moderate modern" and "experimental" points to identitarian tensions and internal divisions within art fields that often turn out to mediate political decisions and become instrumental in offering, or limiting, certain opportunities for art initiatives, whereas the triangle of "professional," "young," and "amateur" can be employed to differentiate between separate art circuits with their own economies, institutions, and audiences, legal, social, and cultural norms, etc. When considering the social scale and accessibility of art initiatives, a relevant solution might be to introduce a three-part typology of "public," "semiprivate" and "private." By the same token, and considering that social access is often conditioned by law, these concepts could be variously combined with another triad that consists of "legal," "semi-legal" and "illegal." A further important relationship to be taken into account is that of "capital" and "peripheral." It proves fruitful when, for example, it is used to explain how initiatives that could not have happened in the capital city of a country or in its other metropolitan areas were perfectly possible and did take place in the provinces. This also pertains to the last item that makes up the proposed configuration of concepts, namely, the triad of "aesthetic," "sociocultural" and "political." It helps to clarify, among others, the fact that certain art practices could easily find their way to mainstream art galleries, others had to content themselves with cultural or social institutions, and still others had the potential to become instruments of cultural

politics. However, these are only some of the ways in which all these concepts can be applied. In order to account for the complexity of actual cases, they can be reconfigured, recombined, layered, or superimposed one on another within their expanded and open model.

Multilateral network flows: the concept of video art as a cultural transfer

Now, if we apply this expanded model to the case of Labirynth Gallery (Galeria Labirynt) in Lublin, the biggest town in Eastern Poland, the gallery could be described as a formal, public, alternative and experimental art institution for professional artists that was created in a peripheral region of Poland and operated within the sociocultural framework of the local Municipal House of Culture. The gallery was established in 1969 by local artists from the Lublin Group, who wanted to present "art that is open and sensitive to the fast civilizational and cultural changes of the contemporary world."[42] Even though the initiative emerged as an informal grassroots action, it quickly became formal through and through as its establishment was actively supported by local political authorities and other municipal institutions.[43] From the outset, it was hoped that the gallery would create an alternative venue to the local Bureau of Art Exhibitions (Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych), a much more traditionalist space where members of the Union of Polish Visual Artists (Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków) had the right to be showcased cyclically, no matter how uninteresting or "mediocre" their art was. Such a performance of "union democracy" was openly and widely criticized at the time.[44] Even some members of the

42 IJK [Ireneusz J. KAMIŃSKI], "Grupa Lubelska w Labiryncie," *Kamena*, 1969, issue 13, p. 10; the translation of the quote is mine.
43 *Ibid*.
44 Ireneusz J. KAMIŃSKI, "Noworoczny remanent," *Kamena*, 1970, issue 1, p. 10.

local branch of the union supported the idea of creating in Lublin an "authored gallery" – a term that was rapidly gaining in popularity in Poland in the early 1970s – that would present a well-considered, consistent exhibition program with carefully selected artworks.[45] The sociocultural framework of the local Municipal House of Culture provided protection for the emerging art venue from direct control of the union and legitimized its ambition to confront and comment on the cultural changes of the contemporary world.

During the first few years of its existence, Labirynth was closed and reopened several times due to technical problems with its premises and infrastructure. As a result, its announced alternative program remained more promise than reality. It was not until the middle of 1974, when Andrzej Mroczek, a former employee of the local Bureau of Art Exhibitions, became its director, that it started to focus on presenting neo-avant-garde conceptual, media, and performance art from Poland and abroad. Before Mroczek began to run the gallery, he had already built an informal translocal network of contacts with Polish artists and art critics from other cities, mainly Wrocław and Warsaw. During the years 1974–1976, he was actively expanding this network by starting long-term cooperation with the directors of several authored alternative galleries showcasing conceptual, media, and performance art, such as the Warsaw-based Contemporary Gallery, Remont Gallery, Mospan Gallery and the Dziekanka Studio. He also collaborated with neo-avant-garde artists like Józef Robakowski, Zdzisław Sosnowski and Jan Świdziński, who had gained high social capital in their artistic milieu and often acted as freelance commissioners of art events. Through inviting them to the gallery with their informal translocal and

45 Maria PRZESNYCKA, "O plastyce lubelskiej. Rozmowa z prezesem Zarządu Okręgu Związku Polskich Artystów Plastyków – Andrzejem Kołodziejkiem," *Sztandar Ludu*, 1975, issue 27, p. 6.

trans-state networks of contacts and cooperation, Mroczek created for himself and the gallery a genuine network of networkers. As a result, he was able to invite and present numerous experimental artists from key art centers in Poland as well as numerous countries of socialist East-Central Europe and the West. It was particularly important in the case of foreign artists since Mroczek himself almost never traveled outside Poland; the only time he did go abroad was to Budapest.[46]

Due to the scope and variety of informal networks that the gallery was crossing and connecting, it became a very active and important institutional actor in the topography of transnational contacts, exchanges, and transfers of the 1970s artistic neo-avant-gardes. Several foreign artists showcased there, e.g., Stano Filko or VALIE EXPORT, were invited for individual shows, but most of those coming from abroad participated in huge collective events like two editions of *Labirynth Gallery Offer* in 1976–1977 or *Body and Performance* and *Unidentified Activity*, both in 1978. Among the artists from state socialist countries of East-Central Europe who participated in the gallery's events were Bálint Szombathy, Goran Đjorđević, Zoran Popović, Tibor Hajas, Raša Todosijević, Ivan Ladislav Galeta, Tomislav Gotovac and Neša Paripović. Many others were presented in 1976, when Czech artist, networker, and exhibition commissioner Jiří Valoch, who had been introduced to Mroczek by Robakowski, organized the show *Art Text* as part of *Labirynth Gallery Offer*. Valoch mobilized his own network of contacts in order to gather therein works by over one hundred artists from East-Central Europe and the West, including John Crozier, Katalin Ladik, Dick Higgins, Bob Cobbing, Herman de Vries, Jeremy Adler, Gianfranco Baruchello, Jan Steklík, Andrzej Partum, Petr Štembera, Amelia Etlinger, Józef Robakowski,

46 Patryk WASIAK, *Kontakty między artystami wizualnymi z Polski, Węgier, Czechosłowacji i NRD w latach 1970–1989*, Warszawa: IPN 2019, pp. 226, 230.

Jan Kubíček, Bálint Szombathy, Karel Adamus, Robert Rehfeldt, Dalibor Chatrný, Endre Tót, J. H. Kocman and, last but not least, himself.

Some of the network contacts Mroczek made and developed in the years 1974–1976 had already been connected to the emerging video art culture. Tomek Kawiak, an artist and Mroczek's close friend who left Poland for France in the early 1970s, was instrumental in organizing, in 1975, at the Contemporary Gallery in Warsaw, a two-section show of a cosmopolitan group of artists living in Paris entitled *Video Art and Sociological Art*. The following year, in collaboration with Mroczek, he prepared at Labirynth Gallery another exhibition of his French connections entitled *Made in Paris. Les Conventionalistes.* Among the presented works was the documentation of Antonio Muntadas' several television and video actions from 1974–1975. Nevertheless, it was Józef Robakowski's network that made it possible for Labirynth Gallery to host, in October 1976, *Video Art*, an important two-day event. During the show, the eponymous concept, appearing in its English wording, was applied for the first time to the practices of Polish artists. The event, as conceived, organized, and narrated by Robakowski, can be interpreted in terms of cultural transfer. The object, or content, of this transfer was the very concept of video art, together with the normative rules of an artistic genre behind it and a symbolic and largely imaginary effect of participation in the international – or more precisely, transnational, transregional, and transcontinental – video art scene.

The event showcased two artistic milieus that were the most active in the field of video. One of them was gathered around the Workshop of the Film Form (Warsztat Formy Filmowej – WFF) in Łódź, and the other consisted of members of the Recent Art Gallery (Galeria Sztuki Najnowszej) from Wrocław. The fact that these Polish artists presented their works for the first time under the aegis of "video art" did not mean that they had not made works with the medium of video before. Quite the contrary: the first instances of using television or video equipment as an artistic tool in Poland date back to 1973, and in the years of 1974–1976, a number of Polish artists (all the ones included in the Lublin event and a few more) were given access to the technical equipment in different cities around Poland or abroad (in West Germany, Denmark, Belgium, and the Netherlands), and could make their first works with it. *Video Art* in Lublin brought together the results of these dispersed prior activities and showcased them mainly in the form of photographic documentation of video performances, stills from TV monitor screens, textual descriptions, and conceptual diagrams. Apart from them, some live video performances were made on the spot; it is not certain if any tapes were played.

Video art works by Polish artists presented during the Lublin show had their local artistic roots and generative contexts, yet prior to this event they had been described differently, most often in technical terms like "television" or "mechanical means of recording and transmission."[47] This means that the transfer and introduction of the concept of video art into the field of artistic culture in Poland could have been aimed, among other things, at securing a distinct artistic status for practices with the medium and legitimizing them as an art form.

The departure point of the transfer – its resource rather than a source – was de Appel Gallery in Amsterdam. Robakowski went there together with his WFF colleagues Wojciech Bruszewski and Jan Świdziński (who used to collaborate with the group at the time) in February 1976. It was an intensive period of foreign travel and presentations for the group in Denmark, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Within a month, video works by selected members of WFF were showcased in the form of photo documentation, conceptual schemes, and tape screenings at *Video International* in Aarhus Kunstmuseum, *V International Open Encounter*

47 *Mechanical means of recording and transmission. Film, television, photography, sound* was the title of WFF's two-day event at Remont Gallery in April 1975.

on Video in the Internationaal Cultureel Centrum in Antwerp, and their own group exhibition organized by de Appel. The events provided Robakowski and Bruszewski with an apt opportunity to learn about the transnational and transregional video art scene and its theoretical contexts. However, it was their visit to de Appel that proved particularly fruitful. By early 1976, the gallery had already established itself as a node in the transnational network of institutions supporting video art. The previous year, Wies Smals, the founder and director of the gallery, began to create a collection of video art. The first representative selection of tapes by artists from Western Europe, the USA, and Japan was acquired from two leading video art production and distribution centers: Studio Oppenheim in Cologne and art/tapes/22 in Florence. The growing collection was already being presented to the public in 1975, and in early February 1976, when the number of tapes had grown to nearly eighty, de Appel organized a "video week," during which the materials were screened every day for eight hours.[48] Coming to the gallery for their own exhibition and screenings a few days later, the WFF members grabbed the opportunity to study the video art collection and photocopy texts on the new artistic genre. As they watched the tapes for hours, Robakowski and Bruszewski made notes with descriptions of individual works and documented them by photographing their stills on TV monitors.[49] These materials were later used in the catalog of the Lublin show.

The catalog was designed in the form of a number of separate cards that were printed on both sides and enclosed in an envelope.[50] They featured various documentation of video works made by the artists prior to the Lublin event. Additionally, one of the cards featured

48 Marga van MECHELEN, *De Appel. Performances, Installations, Video, Projects, 1975–1983*, Amsterdam: de Appel 2006, pp. 276–279.

49 Józef ROBAKOWSKI in conversation with the author, September 2018.

50 *Video Art* (exh. catalog), Lublin: Galeria Labirynt 1976, separate unnumbered cards. Labirynt Gallery archive.

photo documentation and textual descriptions of works from de Appel's collection along with Robakowski's manifesto *Video art – a chance to investigate reality*, which was published in Polish and English. The text was a fine example of active reception, transformative adaptation, and reinterpretation of the concept of video art as transferred content. It combined WFF's local ideas about film and other "mechanical means of recording and transmission" being capable of transforming human cognitive apparatus with motifs taken from the West-centered, transregional, and transcontinental discourse on video art as a critical alternative to professional television culture.

In the text, Robakowski defines video art in terms of its resistance to television – a mass medium in the service of social engineering and political propaganda. Video art was supposed to critically expose television by showing that, despite being a "universal language," and "the most perfect method of human communication," it got misemployed to manipulate people and tell them how to live. However, the new art form was also able to refresh our cognitive experience of the world and teach us to look at it beyond any conventions, whether artistic, moral, religious, mental, social, or political. These critical statements remained quite abstract in their anthropological and sociological character, as they were devoid of any precise ideological or geopolitical references. While it gave them an air of universality, it also protected the text from possible state censorship. However, it is quite probable that readers in Poland – and possibly beyond – could have interpreted some of the statements as instances of doublespeak and sensed in them allusions to the employment of state television as the communist party propaganda tool in the People's Republic of Poland.

The manifesto was also supposed to act as a textual and visual performative that not only established video as an artistic genre but also created for Polish video artists a symbolic connection, an imaginary relation of compatibility, and equal footing with their counterparts in the West. Introducing a four-part typology of video art practices,

Robakowski provided numerous instances of Western artists for each of the categories. Only one example from Poland and the whole of East-Central Europe was included. It was WFF, Robakowski's own group, which was listed together with VALIE EXPORT, Alan Kaprow and Reiner Ruthenbeck as engaged in the "analysis of the structure of television." The textual performative that created this symbolic connection was confirmed and strengthened by a visual one. On the other page of the catalog card, among stills from selected video works by Western artists Urs Lüthi, Allan Kaprow, Reiner Ruthenbeck, Vito Acconci, Arnulf Reiner and VALIE EXPORT, photo images of two pieces by Robakowski and Bruszewski were featured. Both performative gestures, the textual and the visual, were not untypical of the Polish neo-avant-garde milieu. Its members often attempted, as part of their artistic antagonistics, to gain symbolic capital and build their position in the local field of experimental art by means of compulsive identification with and more or less imaginary participation in what was then regarded as the universal context of the international and transnational art scene. In effect, the reference to "video art" can also be regarded as an instrument of Robakowski's artistic policy and position-building strategy.

The transfer of the concept of video art was effective but initially quite limited in its scope. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, this generic term circulated in Poland almost exclusively within a narrow neo-avant-garde milieu as it offered artists who worked with the medium an opportunity for self-definition, self-presentation, and soon after – for self-historicization. However, the above-mentioned compulsive identification with the West-centered video art scene and the imaginary relation of being on equal footing with its practitioners might also have provided symbolic legitimization for an important project called *Infermental* and, therefore, played a vital role in its emergence.

This "first international magazine on video cassettes," as it was subtitled, began as an initiative of Hungarian artist Gábor Bódy. He came up with the idea of a cyclic

magazine with video materials that would be produced by shifting editorial teams in different places around the world. In the 1970s, the situation in Hungary and Poland with regard to the video was quite similar. In both countries, artists had limited access to technical equipment and managed to make very few works when compared to their Western counterparts. The concept of video art arrived there as a cultural transfer, and there were no institutions that would be devoted to supporting the new art genre in terms of patronage, production, and distribution. In the absence of infrastructure and financing, it was the performativity of a symbolic act that had to step in. As Bódy sought to make his idea come true, he invited Robakowski and a few other Polish artists who were presenting their works in Budapest, in March 1981, to sign the *Infermental* founding deed. Together with another Hungarian signatory of the deed, artist Dóra Maurer, they strove to represent the whole of the East, or the socialist bloc, and could approach their Western counterparts on a symbolically equal footing. Soon after, in October 1981, in Mannheim, another manifesto was signed by Bódy and Robakowski on the one hand and, on the other, by Astrid Heibach from West Germany and Georg Pinter from the USA. It announced *Infermental* as a project that was designed to bridge the division between the East and the West. Between 1982 and 1991, ten editions of the magazine were edited and published in different locations, mainly in the "Northern West:" Western Europe, Canada, the USA, and Japan, but also in Hungary (the editorial team included Małgorzata Potocka, Polish artist and the then life partner of Robakowski) and Macedonia.[51] The materials were screened at various film

51 On the history of *Infermental*, see George CLARK – Dan KIDNER – James RICHARDS, *A Detour Around Infermental*, Southend-on-Sea: Focal Point Gallery 2012; and Tomasz ZAŁUSKI, "Infermental. Pierwszy międzynarodowy magazyn na kasetach wideo (1981–1991)," in: Ryszard W. KLUSZCZYŃSKI – Tomasz ZAŁUSKI (eds.), *Wideo w sztukach wizualnych*, Łódź – Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego i Galeria Labirynt 2018, pp. 205–246.

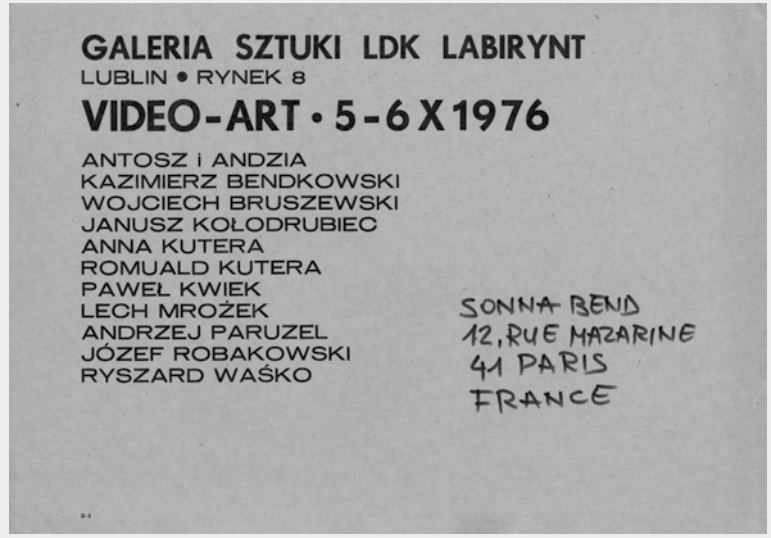
and video festivals and also took place in museums and art galleries. Becoming a sort of "traveling exhibition," *Infermental* operated at the intersection of its several circuits – film, video, and visual arts. In Poland, between 1987 and 1989, Robakowski showed works from different *Infermental* editions as part of the Video-Art-Clip festival, which he organized in Łódź, in different locations, including an informal experimental art venue called Galeria Wschodnia.[52] He also presented them in Lublin, on the invitation of Mroczek, who had meanwhile become the director of the local Bureau of Art Exhibitions.

Infermental embodied the very idea and logic of trans-state and transcontinental networks of contacts and cooperation, and it developed throughout the decade by way of multilateral flows between different regions of the world. Even as it enabled increasingly deterritorialized global transfers, it was triggered in East-Central Europe as a sort of counter-transfer of the concept of video art. In the process, the video as such was turned into a pure notion of transfer, circulation, and networking. Keiko Sei, who worked on the tenth edition of the magazine in Japan, made this very remark when the initiative was coming to a close:

> What Infermental achieved more than anything else [...] was that it made video invisible [...]. Networking takes over the meaning of video (I watch you, you watch me, we watch each other), and we don't even need any media here. Video doesn't necessarily exist by being watched, it can only be a notion.[53]

52 Tomasz ZAŁUSKI, "Galeria Wschodnia – A Biography of the Place," in: Daniel MUZYCZUK – Tomasz ZAŁUSKI (eds.), *Galeria Wschodnia. Dokumenty / Documents 1984–2017*, Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi – In Search of... Foundation 2019, pp. 271–273.

53 Heiko DAXL – Evgenija DIMITRIEVA, *Infermental 10. Da – Zwiechen – Hier / There – Between – Here* (exh. catalog), Osnabrück – Skopje: Infermental 1991, p. 38.


GALERIA SZTUKI LDK LABIRYNT
LUBLIN • RYNEK 8
VIDEO-ART • 5-6 X 1976
ANTOSZ i ANDZIA
KAZIMIERZ BENDKOWSKI
WOJCIECH BRUSZEWSKI
JANUSZ KOŁODRUBIEC
ANNA KUTERA
ROMUALD KUTERA
PAWEŁ KWIEK
LECH MROŻEK
ANDRZEJ PARUZEL
JÓZEF ROBAKOWSKI
RYSZARD WAŚKO
SONNA BEND
12, RUE MAZARINE
41 PARIS
FRANCE

↩

Video Art, October 5–6, 1976, Lublin: Labirynth Gallery. The exhibition catalog in the form of separate cards placed in an envelope. A copy of the envelope addressed to Ileana Sonnabend [sic], a New York and Paris-based art dealer who collected and distributed video art in the early 1970s. Labirynt Gallery archive.

↩

Video Art, October 5–6, 1976, Lublin: Labirynth Gallery. A card from the exhibition catalog presenting documentation of video works by Józef Robakowski and Wojciech Bruszewski among pieces by Urs Lüthi, Allan Kaprow, Reiner Ruthenbeck, Vito Acconci, Arnulf Reiner and VALIE EXPORT. Labirynth Gallery archive.

Catalogs of different editions of *Infermental*, 1980–1991. Photo: Tomasz Załuski.

Gabor Bódy and Małgorzata Potocka in Budapest as members of the team preparing the 3rd edition of *Infermental*, 1984. Exchange Gallery archive.

↩

The 2nd International Festival *Video-Art-Clip*, March 24–25, 1988, Łódź: Galeria Wschodnia. Art historian Vera Body and Józef Robakowski presenting works from different editions of *Infermental*. Photo: Jerzy Grzegorski. Galeria Wschodnia archive.

↩

The 2nd International Festival *Video-Art-Clip*, March 24–25, 1988, Łódź: Galeria Wschodnia. A view of the audience during the presentation of works produced by Studio 235 Media Art from Cologne, with an introduction by artists Alexander Honory and Norbert Meissner. Photo: Jerzy Grzegorski. Galeria Wschodnia archive.

Tomasz Załuski

Józef Robakowski, *An Exercise for Two Hands*, video performance at *Works and Words*, September 20–30, 1979, Amsterdam: de Appel. Exchange Gallery archive.

Conceived as a form of dialogue and exchange between East and West, *Infermental* was preceded – and possibly preconditioned – by another initiative that can be seen in terms of a counter-transfer, namely *Works and Words*, organized in Amsterdam, in 1979, by de Appel. The transfer and counter-transfer of the concept of video art were, in this case, part of a much wider assemblage of multilateral flows and factors that contributed to this important West–East confrontation. The transfer returned there, above all, in a direct and literal manner, with Robakowski and his (former) WFF's colleagues[54] Paweł Kwiek, Ryszard Waśko, Antoni Mikołajczyk, Andrzej Paruzel, and Kazimierz Bendkowski participating in the video art section, where they presented their documentation, screened tapes, or performed live with video cameras. But it was also coming back in an indirect way and shaping the event from behind the scenes. During his visit to de Appel in 1976, Robakowski became friends with Wes Smals and they maintained this informal contact in the following years as an important thread in their respective art networks. When de Appel decided to organize its huge presentation of experimental art from East-Central Europe which came to be known as *Works and Words*, and began their research in selected countries of the region, Robakowski was appointed one of their experts and consultants for Poland.[55]

More generally speaking, the event as a whole can be seen as a major counter-transfer of East-Central European art to the Netherlands and a feedback effect of de Appel's cultural politics towards the region. In order to learn how this counter-transfer was, in turn, actively received, utilized, and reframed in the Netherlands, it

54 WFF ceased to operate as a group in 1977. After that, its former members pursued their individual paths but, especially during events organized abroad, were still presenting their earlier works under the aegis of the group. See *Works and Words, 20–30 September 1979* (flyer with the program of the event), Amsterdam: de Appel 1979.

55 *Ibid.* See also Josine van DROFFELAAR – Piotr OLSZANSKI, "Introduction," in: *Works and Words* (exh. catalog), Amsterdam: de Appel 1980, p. 1.

is instructive to look at Franck Gribling's *Preface* to the *Works and Words* catalog. Gribling was a strong and vocal proponent of Dutch engagement in presenting East-Central European experimental art. It was he who, after co-organizing the exhibition *Osteuropese Conceptuele Fotografie* in Eindhoven,[56] suggested to the program council of de Appel a more comprehensive show of current art from the East. In his framing of *Works and Words*, he claimed that the Western European art world in the 1970s was strongly dominated by art from the USA. There was a need, therefore, to break this dominance by means of a show of art from state socialist countries in the East since it embodied a set of ideas and practices that were equally worthy of attention or even more interesting than Western art. The counter-transfer of art from the East was seemingly employed in the service of internal geocultural politics within the Western bloc and turned into a tool of resistance against the US artistic hegemony. What is more, Gribling would use the exemplary character of art from the East to criticize the Dutch and, more generally, the Western art world for their cultural politics and the surrendering to a growing power of bureaucracy. He insisted that, in artistic terms, the whole West could learn a lot from the East. While the former was still focused on aesthetics and disciplinary or media divisions between the arts, the latter turned to ideas instead and ventured to integrate art with life.[57] It is easy to recognize that Gribling's reframing of the counter-transfer of East-Central European art to the Netherlands was not without a degree of exoticization and orientalization.

Artists and art critics who participated in *Works and Words* already felt this orientalization. They objected to being ghettoized as "exotic dissidents" from "Eastern

56 Gerrit Jan de ROOK, *Oosteeuropese conceptuele fotografie* (exh. catalog), Eindhoven: Technische Hogeschool Eindhoven 1977.

57 Frank GRIBLING, "Preface," in: *Works and Words*, p. 3.

Europe," and forced the organizers to use the concept of "Central Europe" instead. They also criticized the false universalism and uniformization inherent in the Western idea of art, and proposed a non-hierarchical, radically contextualist, and pluralist approach that was rooted in cultural geography and promoted the local specificity of art practices. The event of *Works and Words* had, therefore, one more outcome in its counter-transfer performativity. It was a transregional pre-emergence of what later came to be called "horizontal" thinking about art from East-Central Europe.[58] Among the multitude of threads that had interwoven to form the complex texture of this event, there was the concept of video art and its transferential trajectory.

Conclusion

Cases like the Labirynth Gallery in Lublin and the *Video Art* show cannot be contained by art historiography driven by methodological nationalism, nor can they be squeezed into the official/unofficial dichotomy because they combine formal institutional structures with informal networks of cooperation as well as a public art venue, operating within the sociocultural framework of the local Municipal House of Culture, with an alternative program focus on experimental art practices. CTA, critically reconsidered in its current advancements and coupled with a cautiously applied transnational perspective that replaces the above-mentioned dichotomy with an expanded categorization model,

58 It was mainly in the catalog texts of art critics Jaroslav Anděl from Czechoslovakia and Ješa Denegri from Yugoslavia that such a proto-horizontal approach to art practices in East-Central Europe was outlined. See Jaroslav ANDĚL, "The Present Czechoslovakian Art Situation," in: *Works and Words*, pp. 69–70; and Ješa DENEGRI, "The Situation of the New Art in Yugoslavia," in: *Works and Words*, pp. 88–89. See also Tomasz ZAŁUSKI, "Świat podzielony. Geopolityka sztuki według KwieKulik," *Sztuka i Dokumentacja*, 2014, No. 11, pp. 31–35, and Zsuzsa LÁSZLÓ, "Works and Words. The Invention and Renunciation of the Concept of East European Art," https://institutulprezentului.ro/en/2018/11/15/works-and-words-the-invention-and-renunciation-of-the-concept-of-east-european-art/ (accessed May 15, 2023).

provides a comprehensive tool for the analysis of the actual richness and dynamics of trans-border artistic processes. It performs well as an integrative framework, allowing for a joint analysis of issues and aspects that have been separated by different fields of study and greatly benefiting from incorporating elements of their fragmentary methodologies. As seen through the lens of CTA, the event of *Video Art* turns out to be characterized by a dispersed trans-state topography and an extended temporality. It was preconditioned by events that had taken place at numerous nodal points of artistic and institutional networks, and it became another nodal point by way of the local reception and resemantization of the concept of video art that had been brought there by cultural transmitters with their own interests and agendas. It also ceases to be a strictly local occurrence as it is shown to have contributed, along meandering and mediated trajectories, to major transregional and, indeed, global initiatives like *Works and Words* or *Infermental*.

Revealing such far-reaching connections and ramifications, CTA promises to offer a global account of seemingly local events since global art history "is not a matter of geographical scope but of questions and methods," and "is not the reverse side of Western art history but of national art history and cultural separations […]."[59] Finally, if the project of East-Central European art history in its "horizontal" paradigm and counter-hegemonic agenda could be defined by three C-lettered words: Contextualism, Comparativism, and Connectivism, which describe its parallel aspects and/or consecutive phases, then CTA may be among these research directions that are pushing the development of the connectivist aspect/phase to its limits. And by the same token, making room for a completely different agenda to emerge.

59 DACOSTA KAUFMANN – DOSSIN – JOYEUX-PRUNEL, "Introduction. Reintroducing Circulations," pp. 15, 18.