

Marie Klimešová – Hana Rousová, *So Near, So Far 1947–1960. Czech Art in International Sociocultural Contexts*, Prague: Arbor vitae societas 2023, transl. by Anna C. Brayson, 300 pages

Mathilde Arnoux is Research Director and Head of French Publications at the DFK Paris (Series Passages and Passerelles). Her research focuses on artistic relations from a historical perspective in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. As part of the ERC project OwnReality, she worked with a team of European researchers from France, Germany and Poland to explore the notion of the real and reality in art discourse between 1960 and 1989, and, through this notion, to question the dichotomies of the Cold War.

marnoux@dfk-paris.org

Review

A Montage to Disrupt the Art History of the Cold War in Europe⁽¹⁾

Mathilde Arnoux

1 Translated from the French by Chris Miller.

The physical attributes of a book can offer a dramatic representation of what lies within. In Marie Klimešová and Hana Rousová's *So Near, So Far 1947–1960. Czech Art in International Sociocultural Contexts*, form and content are perfectly complementary. It is an imposing volume, and the luxurious grey cloth-binding features authors, title, and subtitle printed in fluorescent pink at the four corners of the cover, seeming to direct the reader's attention to North West, North East, South East and South West, while in the center lies a broken circle, as if promising an escape from infinite repetition and an openness to further interrogation. In the title, *So Near, So Far 1947–1960*, which echoes that of a Miles Davis album of 1963–64, we hear how we are remote from a past that still lingers in memory, and how near and how far can be the experiences of socialist and capitalist societies and of successive generations.

The end papers front and back are printed with an undated world map captioned on page 2. It shows the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in red, the “people’s democracies” (Socialist-bloc countries) in pink, “the imperialists” – the USA and Great Britain – in dark grey, the “capitalist states under the influence of the Anglo-American imperialists” in light grey, “semi-colonial states” formally granted their freedom in green, and “colonies” in yellow. A network of dots sometimes printed over the colors designates “states with liberation movements and [those] with strong workers’ resistance movements.” “Uninhabited” countries are shown in white. Red flags are associated with the World Committee of Defenders of Peace (WCDFP), whose congress was held in Prague in 1950, while red triangles indicate members of the United States special operations forces. Readers are thus invited to imagine themselves in the midst of the Cold War and to take up the perspective of the socialist Czechoslovak cartographers. Those who experienced the Cold War and lived within the Socialist bloc will find these maps familiar; those who lived in the capitalist bloc will discover

A Montage to Disrupt

Mathilde Arnoux

much that they did not know, while those born later are invited to perceive one of the ways in which the world was then represented. The titles of the work, an orientation that clearly does not align with the cardinal points, and the maps on which the book opens, all prefigure a spatial and temporal oscillation between distance and proximity, raising, from the very first page, questions concerning the authors’ purview in their survey of Czech art in the international socio-cultural context of the Cold War.

The principal choices and characteristics of the volume are set out in the contents list. It lists three very rich sections divided by the pink pages that punctuate the book’s fore-edge: 1. Abstraction – Symbol of Personal Freedom; 2. The Realist Picture of Reality and Demagogy; 3. The Discursive Space of International Exhibitions. These three parts focus on the artistic forms that polarized debates during the years specified in the title and on confirming the role of international exhibitions in the formation of art discourse during the same period. Skimming the subtitles within these sections we find quotations: “The problem of isolation seems a very pressing one here” or “We don’t want to do poetry, we want to do reality,” the names of countries – Spain, France, and Italy – and of cities – Warsaw, Paris, Prague, Hiroshima, Mexico City, Bratislava, and Vienna. Only in the final chapter-section do Moscow and the USA appear, alongside Finland, Yugoslavia, Japan, and England. The eye is also caught by the names of now mythical debates and exhibitions (*Darmstädter Gespräche*, *Documenta*, and *Expo 1958*), by the Polish magazine *Przegląd Artystyczny* (Art Review), and by personalities such as Pierre Restany, Mário Pedrosa, Gert Schiff, Władysława Jaworska, Bernard Buffet, Vladimír Boudník, and Jiří Šotola.

The contents thus feature a subtle mix of familiar and lesser-known names, and combine large-scale analytic arguments with archive materials such as the transcription of a discussion between members of the AICA (The International Association of Art Critics) and Czech artists

in 1960, and a little anthology of Czech texts published 1951–58, which discuss typification in Socialist Realism. Three picture essays further interrupt the flow of text, respectively “The War Is Not Over;” “Blasphemy,” and “Vanitas;” their thematic nature contrasts with the profusion of images in the rest of the book. The contents list makes it clear that the book is neither a canonical narrative nor an attempt to establish one. The ousting of the canon is to be effected by a view of Czech art in its international socio-cultural context, a view that emerges from this assemblage of heterogeneous matter, in the gap between archive and historic narration, between text and image, between Cold-War forms of art discourse and today’s. The authors’ perspective is neither national nor ideological. Their object is not to make room for the art history of a socialist nation. Rather they seek, on the basis of questions raised by Czech art production between 1947 and 1960, to produce a profound shift in the art history of the time.

Specialist works on the art of Eastern and Central Europe often point out that the art-history manuals used in the Anglo-Saxon world, in particular, *Art Since 1900: Modernism. Antimodernism. Postmodernism*,⁽²⁾ do not take into account the artistic practices that originated in these spaces either before or after the advent of Soviet socialism. *So Near, So Far* rejects the standard narrative and sets out its own stall in no uncertain terms. Thus, in the text “What We Have Tried to Do” (p. 15), the authors refuse to respond to the standard publishing “ask;” they do not attempt to sweep aside the old in order to produce a new perspective, thus satisfying the demand for novelty. Rather, they seek to establish the facts on which a view of the subject could be founded:

A Montage to Disrupt

Mathilde Arnoux

We have [...] decided not to produce another fabulated narrative with a beginning and an end, and not to attempt a revision of the history of art up to now. We consider it much more persuasive, because with a more credible result, to present a (not just Benjamin-style) montage of facts and phenomena.

*Avoiding enshrinement
as heritage*

As the contents list suggests, the USA and USSR do not play a central role in the book. The work seems rather to advance an interlinked history of the artistic scenes of Europe, including those of Germany, France, Spain, Austria and Poland. The history of the Czechoslovak scene is much to the fore, notably in its dialogues with Brazil and Mexico. The two major Cold War powers are not excluded; their variants of authoritarian discourse do, of course, form a background, but neither is considered omnipotent nor seen to have single-handedly effected a renewal of artistic sensibilities. The reader’s attention is drawn to recent research on the USSR and USA, such as that of Catherine Dossin, who has shown that American abstract art was barely if at all known in Europe during the 1950s.⁽³⁾ Soviet power is presented as colonizing and responsible for establishing totalitarian powers in its satellite states. However, the authors take no side in the controversy, central but by no means confined to specialists in the German Democratic Republic, about the approach to be taken in studying the socialist regimes; when focused on analyzing power within state socialism (the totalitarian approach)

2 Yve-Alain BOIS – Benjamin H. D. BUCHLOH – David JOSELIT – Hal FOSTER – Rosalind KRAUSS, *Art Since 1900: Modernism. Antimodernism. Postmodernism*, London: Thames & Hudson 2004.

3 Catherine DOSSIN, “Mapping the Reception of American Art in Postwar Western Europe,” *ARTL@S Bulletin*, Vol. 1, 2012, No. 1, pp. 33–39; Catherine DOSSIN, *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s–1980s: A Geopolitics of Western Art Worlds*, London: Routledge 2015.

studies produce very different results from those (the social approach) prioritizing the practices of individuals and groups seeking to stay alive in those polities.⁽⁴⁾ Interest in the Socialist Realism of the USSR's satellite states is described by Klimešová and Rousová as “a somewhat masochistic approach to historical traumas;” they find such interest questionable, inasmuch as it tends to enshrine as heritage an orthodoxy that they consider of strictly sociological interest and devoid of artistic merit. The book thus disassociates itself from the post-millennium tendency to classify Socialist Realism as “unresearched material,” which made it manna from heaven for researchers seeking virgin fields.

This is one of the reasons that the authors, following in the footsteps of Walter Benjamin's *On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress*, which they quote in an epigraph,⁽⁵⁾ are anxious to find room for the evident fissures within the phenomena that they take as central. These fissures are not reducible to the ideological or political oppositions inherited from the division of Europe, but are constitutive of any historical phenomena “rescued from their ‘enshrinement as heritage.’” To bring these fissures to light, the authors consider facts and phenomena from various perspectives, comparing and highlighting

4 Sandrine KOTT, “Pour une histoire sociale du pouvoir en Europe communiste: introduction thématique,” *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, Vol. 49, 2002, No. 2, pp. 5–23; Michel CHRISTIAN – Emmanuel DROIT, “Écrire l'histoire du communisme : l'histoire sociale de la RDA et de la Pologne communiste en Allemagne, en Pologne et en France,” *Genèses*, Vol. 15, 2005, No. 61, pp. 118–133; Emmanuel DROIT, “Le moment totalitaire de l'historiographie sur la RDA après 1989 : de la résurgence à l'essoufflement,” in: Jean BAUDOUIN – Bernard BRUNETEAU (eds.), *Le totalitarisme. Un concept et ses usages*, Rennes: PUR 2014, pp. 161–178; Jérôme BAZIN, *Réalisme et égalité. Une histoire sociale des arts en république Démocratique Allemande (1949–1990)*, Dijon: les presses du réel 2015.

5 “What are phenomena rescued from? Not only, and not in the main, from the discredit and neglect into which they have fallen, but from the catastrophe represented very often by a certain strain in their dissemination, their ‘enshrinement as heritage.’ – There have saved through the exhibition of the fissure within them. – There is a tradition that is catastrophe.” Walter BENJAMIN, “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress,” in: Walter BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1999, p. 473.

the relations, direct and indirect, that connect them. They do not seek to write a cultural history of totalitarianism or to make Socialist Realism the principal manifestation of art and art history during the years selected, but to show that, despite ideological restrictions, the links with the rest of Europe were never completely broken and that, in that context, singular forms came into being in Czechoslovakia. They show a particular interest in Czech artists, so described without reference to the division that separated Czechia and Slovakia in 1993.

The book paints a picture of artistic life in Europe during the Cold War through a complex interweaving of strands, making play with scale, contrasts, and modalities of narration. Some of these modalities make the authors' views clear, others exhibit the kind of distancing required by axiological neutrality, while others again establish close and constructive dialogues with the research of their colleagues, such as Catherine Dossin aforementioned, Kristian Handberg and Miriam Oesterreich – and above all with the foundational reflections and theories of Piotr Piotrowski on the artistic practices of the period.⁽⁶⁾ The two authors have great respect for Piotrowski but do not hesitate to revise certain of his interpretations, for example on p. 130 with reference to the role played in Poland and Czechoslovakia by surrealism. “Although Piotrowski echoed Tadeusz Kantor's assertion that there was no room for surrealism in Poland,” the two authors point out that the work of some Polish Art Informel artists such as Jerzy Tchórzewski or Jan Ziemski, and Kantor's theater itself were “closer to surrealist visuality than the work of their Czech colleagues at that time.”

6 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*, December 2018, No. 19, pp. 1–20.

*Multiplying distinctions in
order to build bridges*

The first part is, as we have seen, devoted to abstraction, and begins with the debates to which this tendency gave rise in post-war Germany, after Nazism had declared that modern art was degenerate; these are contrasted with the discussions that occurred in France and, more particularly, in Paris. The arguments and artistic production from these two contexts afford the authors a framework relative to which the multiple form of abstract expression that arose in the rest of Europe can be situated. The scene in the United States, and particularly the instrumentalization of art for the purposes of soft power,⁽⁷⁾ are mentioned but not construed as central. The debates and discourse promulgated or provoked by journals and exhibitions, the context-singularity of cultural policies and their effect on artistic practices in occupied Germany (divided into capitalist and socialist zones), in Austria (which had become neutral), in Franco's Spain, in Brazil (recently freed of its dictatorship), or in Poland (during the Gomułka thaw). All of this influenced the topics, controversies, affinities and protagonists of the discussion between Czech artists and Pierre Restany, Mário Pedrosa, Gert Schiff, and Władysława Jaworska during their stay in Prague in 1960: a typescript of this debate forms an appendix to this chapter.

The debates were dominated by Restany, who began with a general assessment of developments in art since 1945. Taking the view that abstract painting was now exhausted, he advanced new ways of mastering reality. The other protagonists echoed and attempted to clarify his

A Montage to Disrupt

Mathilde Arnoux

7 See on this subject Anselm Franke's analysis of the circumstances under which the conferences of the Congress for Cultural Freedom were held in the post war years. Anselm FRANKE, "A World Frozen in Art," in: Anselm FRANKE – Nida GHOUSE – Paz GUEVARA – Antonia MAJACA (eds.), *Parapolitics. Cultural Freedom and the Cold War*, London: Sternberg Press 2021, pp. 29–47.

comments on the notion of reality, individuality and the crisis of abstraction. Believing that isolation, as experienced in the socialist space, could bring something singular to artistic creation, Restany was driven by his self-confidence and his expectation of the exotic. He asserted his dominant position rhetorically and by encouraging Czech artists to answer a sort of quiz. The debate is interesting not so much for its theoretical content as for what it reveals in terms of preconceived ideas and blindness. It furthers Piotrowski's analysis of the moment of the thaw as making the question of the colonizer more complex, revealing that there might be two colonizers in the Cold War context, "one is described as the oppressor, the other as the liberator" (p. 98). The multi-perspective introduction to the debate allows the authors to cast light on the sources used by the art critic Dore Ashton when she compares Czech with Spanish abstraction. That approach also clarifies what alienated Czech artists from Pierre Restany's top-down viewpoints and received ideas, and elucidates Mário Pedrosa's reasons for being interested in Czech artists.

Czech art makes sporadic appearances throughout the book in the form of works by František Hudeček, Pavel Brázda, Jiří Kolář, Václav Tikal, Stanislav Podhrázský, Vladimír Fuka, and Bedřich Dlouhý, which are brought together in the first picture essays; in mentions of František Kupka at the first Documenta and of Josef Šíma at the second; in references to the tolerance of abstraction in the applied arts in Czechoslovakia of the 1950s, and in the form of artists such as Ladislav Novák, Jiří Kolář and Josef Hiršal, who practiced sound poetry but, unlike their Austrian counterparts, were forbidden to exhibit anywhere but their own studios. The Czech scene becomes central only towards the end of the section, because only when interwoven with the various perspectives afforded by discourse, image and archives can the subject emerge to command the reader's attention. To ensure that the book is accessible to the reader without specialist knowledge of Czechoslovakia, the authors proceed by decentering

and stratification; this enables them to indicate the interdependencies, distinctions and similarities of European artistic practices and invite us to consider them all in their coexistence, despite the political divide.

The authors have made good use of the proliferation of works and exhibitions on the art of the Cold War period, giving their most systematic attention to works in English and Czech, and dialoguing with their authors. But amid this weave of knowledge, one passage stands out, as if setting aside this impressive apparatus to give a particularly sensitive account of the strange Prague experience of Christo Vladimirov Javacheff on his arrival in 1956 from Bulgaria, which he wrote about it in a letter to his brother. Thanks to those he met there, especially Emil František Burian and Burian's circle, and to his encounters with works by Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Joan Miró, and Wassily Kandinsky in artists' collections, Prague seemed to Christo a window onto the West; his image of "the other side" had, till then, been constructed from the few reproductions that he had managed to collect in Bulgaria. This subsection has a special atmosphere, as if reflecting the enthusiasm and excitement of the young man. It is a paradigm of the book as a whole, in that, rather than evoke the overall socialist or capitalist context, it focuses on the way in which singular experiences of a renewed perspective on art can arise in East or West, transcending theory:

Christo's original artistic work did not arise from any direct impulses, nor can it be evaluated on the basis of the constructs of center-periphery, new geography of art, alter-globalism, even alter-canon, etc., that are now in vogue. But one thing is certain: his work managed to reach millions of people in different parts of the world (p. 141).

Alongside abstraction, which evolved differently in different parts of Europe, forms of realism also appeared,

and afforded another way of responding to the traumata inflicted by the Second World War. Realism, as the vehicle of an easily accessible message, lends itself to propaganda uses, and the authors are at pains to make the distinction: "A realism used to explore the meaning of the life of the individual differs from a realism concerned with the changing network of relationships in social space" (p.174). The second part of the book, on realism, distinguishes these two approaches, and draws a clear line between socialist and capitalist contexts. It notes the significant difference between the manifestations of Socialist Realism in Communist Parties that were vehicles of opposition to the established government, as was the case with the French or Italian Communist Parties, and when, in the Eastern bloc, such works had no other function than that of supporting the Soviet *mainmise*. The censorship and constraints imposed on artists within the Eastern bloc are clearly set out.

The difference between dogmatic Socialist Realism and the many forms of realism that rejected it is reflected in the forms of narration chosen by the authors. The first is analyzed through official manifestations, its discourse and theory, in particular as defined by Andrei Zhdanov (p. 272), its dogmas such as typification (p. 282), and its prescriptions as illustrated by a short anthology of the texts aforementioned (pp. 283–291), in all of which the systematic, authoritarian and inflexible nature of these injunctions is evident. The intensity of Soviet propaganda is conveyed through comparative study of three Soviet art exhibitions organized in 1947, in Vienna, Prague, and Bratislava; this is the first time that these exhibitions have received serious attention from scholars. Czechoslovak Socialist Realism is offered as exemplary in works by Jan Čumpelík, Vincenc Živný, and Jarmila Záhořová-Řezníčková, but there are, for the reasons that we have seen, no detailed descriptions of its debates or of the works it produced.

By contrast, all the individual manifestations of realism, in particular those that sought to free themselves of the

top-down ideological conformity of Socialist Realism, whether in theory or practice, are carefully recorded and, through the names, debates and artistic research, we get some notion of their variety and vitality. Though the artists concerned did not necessarily know each other, the authors are able to point to common features; they see Bernard Buffet, in particular, as a figure who nourished artists such as Sándor Bortnyik in Hungary and Aleš Veselý in Czechoslovakia, though how he reached them remains a mystery. In his early works, Buffet represented an existentialist realism in which the authors express an explicit interest, despite the fact that, in French collections, his work has been relegated to the reserves (p. 187). This passage gives an interesting insight into the very different kinds of reception accorded to artists when they are seen from diverging perspectives; Europe emerges as irreducibly various but full of shared questions.

This is clear from the resonances that emerge from this section between the forms, preoccupations, and research of realism. The notion of expanded (*spotęgowany*) realism developed by Tadeusz Kantor and Mieczysław Porębski (Poland) is considered alongside the thinking of Mikuláš Medek (Czechoslovakia) about the dialogue between reality and Surrealism. Jiří Kolář's take on dehumanization sits beside the heretical dialogues with dogmatic Socialist Realism maintained by János Mattis Teutsch in Romania, Bronisław Wojciech Linke in Poland, or Pavel Brázda in Czechoslovakia. The ambivalence of Vojtěch Tittelbach (Czechoslovak), who adapted to the regime's successive requirements, contrasts strongly with the various neo-dada treatments of everyday life. And the everyday became a subject that could vector a critique of state policies, in particular that of Václav Havel, writing in the first few numbers of the journal *Květen* (*May*). The distance between abstraction and realism was not unbridgeable: protagonists of the first part of the book, such as Jiří Padrta, Mikuláš Medek, and the Vienna Art Club, reappear in the second, and help to connect the abstraction scene with the realist one, belying

the standard dichotomies. Though the different subsections of the book can be considered as short, autonomous essays connected to the preceding parts by their notes, the finesse of the overall weave can only be appreciated by reading the whole book. Similarly, the particular attention given to images that are not signaled by references in the body of the text only emerges from a detailed reading; the reader will otherwise miss the passage on the picture essay dedicated to the vanities (p. 201).

Scrutinising exhibition histories

The complexity and ambivalences surrounding Czechoslovak artistic and cultural manifestations in the international context are taken up in the last section of the book through a history or histories of exhibitions. Here, the pressure from and influence of the two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, are more explicit, and the authors devote the major part of their texts to them, without succumbing to binary oppositions. On the contrary, the effort to make room for the fissures integral to the phenomena analyzed – for ambivalence and contradiction – continues throughout the volume. The exhibition as object lends itself admirably to that effort. Alongside the declared ambitions of exhibition organizers, on which light is cast by the political, diplomatic and cultural debates of the time, the selection of works, and their reception by the wider public and by specialists, demonstrate the extent to which exhibitions do not simply present works but establish artistic and cultural discourse⁽⁸⁾ and form part of a cultural industry (as was the

8 See Maria BREMER, "Modes of Making Art History: Looking back at documenta 5 and documenta 6," *Rewriting or Reaffirming the Canon? Critical Readings of Exhibition History*, *Stedelijk Studies*, issue 2, 2015, <https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/modes-ofmaking-art-history> (accessed on 6 December 2024); Maria BREMER, "Kunsthistoriografische Ausstellungsanalyse. Zum Anteil von Ausstellungen an der Kunstgeschichtsschreibung," in: Luise REITSTATTER – Carla-Marinka SCHORR (eds.), *Methoden der Ausstellungsanalyse*, Bielefeld: Transcript, forthcoming (2025).

case with the Czechoslovak exhibitions designed by Josef Svoboda and František Tröster (p. 455)).

The particular historiography that art exhibitions built is constantly taken into account by both authors throughout the book, and it plays a particularly important role in this section, since here they reprise events that helped form the image of Czech art during the Cold War, for example, *Expo 1958* in Brussels, famously one of the first events at which Czech art awakened international interest after the demise of Stalinism. It was a canonical event for Czech art history, but the authors return to it to explore facets that historiography ignored and to rectify and qualify the perspective on Czech art manifested in this major international show. Rather than reassert the originality of Alfréd Radok's *La Laterna Magika* (the product of playwright Jan Grossman, architect Josef Svoboda, scriptwriter Miloš Forman and assistant directors Ján Roháč and Vladimír Svitáček), the two authors compare that multimedia project with the *poème électronique* made by Le Corbusier, Iannis Xenakis and Edgar Varèse and presented in the Philips Pavilion. The comparison between the apparatuses of the two multimedia projects brings out the originality of *Laterna* and makes it possible to analyze how it served Czech propaganda. The part devoted to *Expo 1958* also reconsiders the exhibition *50 Years of Modern Art*, the abandonment of the project *Man and Art* ("world masterpieces from the Stone Age to the present day"), and the Situationists' attack on the 10th Congress of AICA then taking place in Brussels; it also offers reflections on the Expo's coordinating ideology of "universalistic humanism" and exposes its implicit contradictions, in particular the nature of the Belgian Congo display.

In the style of a detective story, the two authors demonstrate their scholarly credentials by radically revising the story of an exhibition by Vladimír Boudník in Brussels. For years, this exhibition has been cited in Czech art history; in fact, it never took place – an indication, if ever there was one, of the fragility of histories based on oral

testimony. Finally, the international presence during the Youth Festival in Prague in 1947, the Czech representation in Moscow during the 6th Festival of Youth and Students in 1957 (seen through the eyes of Jiří Šotola) or in the exhibition dedicated to the art of the Socialist countries in 1958 (as seen by Václav Formánek) offer yet more ways to consider the illusions, contradictions and conditioning to which the Cold War gave rise. The Youth Festival of 1947 sang the praise of democracy and peace just a few months before the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia, while, in 1957, the young intellectual Šotola protected himself from official ire in his article for the magazine *Květen* by focusing on what was most insignificant and uninteresting. In 1959, Formánek expressed his admiration for the most conventional forms and passed over in silence anything that disturbed the consensus, such as Polish abstraction.

Making connections

In the second part of the book, Barthes' *Degré zéro de l'écriture* guides the authors' reflections on politically committed writing; in this last section, *Mythologies* helps them to theorize how cultural events can mask social conflicts and contradictions that should themselves become objects of research. Alongside the epistemology of Walter Benjamin, Barthes's thinking emerges in this work as a locus where Cold War issues were negotiated. It is no common matter to find Benjamin and Barthes thus allied. Both frequently elicit unconditional commitment – and sometimes radical polarizations – among those who draw on their thinking. This encounter exemplifies the possibilities that the two authors present and the journeys they suggest, which allow them to hold a line between canon and revision and maintain dialogue with the standards of the time, while making room for lesser-known voices.

The numerous images are rarely given sustained attention, but the reflections that they elicit form one of the strands from which the authors' argument is woven, and

the visibility granted by this volume gives one hope that monographic exhibitions will be organized or that books will be written making acquaintance with the artists possible outside the frontiers of the languages into which they were born. The history of Czech art in its international socio-cultural context proposed here is the product of decisive choices, and takes account of both recent research and the profound transformations to which that history may give rise. Far from any ossifying mythology or radical exclusions, Czech art in context sketches out a constellation from which a history is even now taking shape, making sense of the interactions within Cold War Europe as a whole, while eschewing the tendentious narratives of the two major powers.

In this light, it also resonates with recent geopolitical developments, where the coverage of the disgraceful invasion of Ukraine by Russia has revealed the persistence of a general tendency to speak of “Eastern Europe and Eastern Europeans without listening to local voices nor attempting to understand the complexity of the region.”⁽⁹⁾ Political theorists such as Jan Smoleński and Jan Dutkiewicz have described this as “Westsplaining,”⁽¹⁰⁾ a phenomenon discussed in the context of art history by David Crowley, Magdalena Radomska, Matthew Rampley, and Margaret Tali during a research workshop organized by the Piotr Piotrowski Centre for Research on East-Central European Art on 28 June 2024. Marie Klimešová and Hana Rousová’s work looks like one possible response to that rhetoric. Their very interesting approach acknowledges our temporal distance from the Cold War, while nevertheless lending an ear to its echoes, which still reach us today: *So Near, So Far* is a very well-chosen title. Throughout the work, the authors question the weight of trauma imposed by the wars past

9 Jan SMOLEŃSKI – Jan DUTKIEWICZ, “The American pundits who can’t resist ‘westsplaining’ Ukraine,” *The New Republic*, 4 March 2022, <https://newrepublic.com/article/165603/carlson-russia-ukraine-imperialism-nato> (accessed on 19 June 2024).
10 <https://arthist.net/archive/41282> (accessed on 19 June 2024).

and present on the writing of art history. They argue that singular forms of artistic expression, in reciprocal dialogue and remote from any nationalism, could and did exist, while leaving room for their conflicts and contradictions, and thus honoring the promise made by the broken circle on the cover.

A Montage to Disrupt

Mathilde Arnoux