Solidarity Could Get Us Out of This Situation. An Interview with Edit András

Daniel Grúň
Pavlína Morganová
Martin Škabraha

Interview

The interview was conducted on the occasion of the launch of the publication *Kulturní převlékání. Umění na troskách socialismu a na vrcholcích nacionalismu* (Cultural Crossdressing. Art on the Ruins of Socialism and Peaks of Nationalism) by the Gallery of Modern Art in Hradec Králové, and its presentation at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague on February 15, 2024.[1]

1 Edit ANDRÁS, *Kulturní převlékání. Umění na troskách socialismu a na vrcholcích nacionalismu*, Hradec Králové: Galerie moderního umění 2023.

Edit András is a Hungarian art historian and critic, a senior researcher at the Institute of Art History, Centre for the Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest, and co-project leader with Magdalena Radomska of the seminar series *Understanding 1989 in East-Central European Art. War or Revolution*, supported by the Getty Foundation as part of its *Connecting Art Histories* initiative. She specializes in Eastern and Central European modern and contemporary art, art theory, and focuses on gender issues, social and political engagement, nationalism and post-socialist transformation.

Daniel Grúň is an art historian, curator, editor and writer, currently employed as Associate Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design and the Institute of Art History, Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava. He is in charge of the Július Koller Society.

Pavlína Morganová is an art historian and curator, and works as the director of the Research Center at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague (VVP AVU).

andras.edit@gmail.com
grun@vsvu.sk
pavlina.morganova@avu.cz
martin.skabraha@avu.cz

Martin Škabraha is the editor-in-chief of the Notebook for Art, Theory and Related Zones.

DG: The claim that society, not the individual, is sick and shows pathological signs is one of the key topoi of 20th century Western literature and art. On the other hand, the popularity of psychotherapy as an effective tool for the treatment of mental problems grew with the enormous demands on performance and productivity in capitalist society. What led you to the theory of cultural trauma and therapy in your book *Kulturális átöltözés. Művészet a szocializmus romjain* (Cultural Crossdressing: Art on the Ruins of Socialism), which is part of the current Czech translation *Kulturní převlékání*?[1] How do you think this method can help us examine the art of the post-1989 transformation?

EA: It is very important to emphasize that the first part of the Czech book was originally published in 2009 in Hungarian, so in a way I was a witness of the process. I would use the concept of trauma more cautiously today. In the nineties and early 2000s it was important to detect it in art as the regime wanted to have a very quick transformation and forget about the socialist past. You should remember that in Hungary the so-called "negotiated revolution" was going on, a compromise among different political camps, between the ex-party elite and the members of the democratic opposition. There was also a huge euphoria over the political changes and the feeling that let's forget everything and we do not have to speak about it. It took a while for artists to go back to this period and to think about what our past and heritage is. I focused on this trend and it could be approached from the concept of trauma.

Now, retrospectively it seems that trauma was awfully overused and its meaning over-expanded. It somehow lost its deep meaning. Remembering and talking about it is very important. But in the (post)socialist societies, the process is a little bit similar to liberated colonies in that they also strongly emphasized the national specificities, when they wanted to carve out a space for themselves within a homogenized region. These countries, which were melted into the Soviet Bloc, were very eager to distinguish themselves. But it is dangerous to lose our memory and our past. And that is why, at that time, I found it very important to deal with artworks that addressed this issue. I thought, we have to remember, we have to discuss. It is still a problem in Hungary that art and art criticism in late socialism and in the transition period are not really discussed. We did not have a kind of "[art]historian's debate" like Germany had. All those questions of collaboration under socialism were swept under the carpet and they are coming back with vengeance. It seemed at the time that the best theoretical framework to conceptualize this attitude was trauma. But as I said, I would be much more cautious now because of the overuse of the concept.

One of the reasons for the boom of the memory discourse was, most probably – thinking back now – that we lost the utopias. The one which we had was defeated, and instead of looking to the future, everybody focused on the past. I believe we have to talk about our losses and also about our experiences during socialism and analyze them so that wounds that we've incurred don't go untreated to stay with us. So in that sense, yes, it is similar to psychoanalysis – it is much better to talk about the controversies, the turncoats, in order to move on. Otherwise there will be skeletons piling up in the closet. And that's where artists really started – artists, not theoreticians! They started to open up those closets, and that helped a lot. The process ended, I would say, in 2007 at the Venice Biennale in the Hungarian Pavilion with Andreas Fogarasi who was awarded the Golden Lion award for his installation and video documentation of the abandoned socialist cultural houses. It was awarded and that signaled the end of the memory discourse of socialism.

1 The Czech publication is a selection of texts from two books written by Edit András and published in Hungarian. Edit ANDRÁS, *Kulturális átöltözés. Művészet a szocializmus romjain*, Budapest: Argumentum Kiadó 2009; Edit ANDRÁS, *Határsértő képzelet. Kortárs művészet és kritikai elmélet Európa keleti felén* (Imaginary Transgression. Contemporary Art and Critical Theory in Eastern part of Europe), Budapest: MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont 2023.

I understood it as a symbolic sign of the Western attitude, which meant: okay, it was important, but that's enough. And somehow after that, this issue did not attract more attention.

I would add one more thing from today's perspective. This is what I would like to emphasize, it is a different segment of the process. I was very active in the 1990s, and I wrote about Little Warsaw, a Hungarian artist duo,[2] who raised questions about the socialist art making practices and they were attacked by fellow-artists who had been in an oppositional role under socialism, as members of the neo-avant-garde as well as by official art critics of the socialist time. Ex-enemies joined forces and attacked the new challengers. Little Warsaw raised issues of socialist realism, socialist public sculpture; they did it in a mild and sophisticated, conceptual way, and yet a petition was signed against them. So I took it as a sign of the need for discussion.

Nowadays I see that there is another aspect – that psychoanalysis as a Western tool is also a substitute. And that is why I would be cautious about using the concept of trauma, because it somehow distracts from deeper issues. So now the deeper questions of society, of inequality, of the climate crisis, etc., of possible futures are simply not on the table and all the responsibility is put on the individuals. And that means that we are ignoring deeply rooted social problems. Revolution, the need for revolutionary change is not on the table, absolutely not. Neither in the imaginary realm nor in reality. So psychoanalysis is a kind of substitute. And that is why I would be very cautious about using the concept of trauma, because it simply puts the responsibility on private individuals or certain groups of people instead of going deep and asking what is happening around us.

2 Little Warsaw was founded in 1999 by the artist duo András Gálik (born 1970) and Bálint Havas (1971).

PM: Boris Groys talked about the "post-communist condition." You called one of your chapters in the recent Czech edition "post-post-communism." What do you mean by this term?

EA: I never use post-communism, it is a conscious choice. I use post-socialism and post-socialist nationalism. The reason is that in the time when I divided my life between the USA and Hungary, I felt that it is an exaggerated word to use post-communism. We did not live in communism, it was only an ideology, it was absolutely not compatible with the existing socialism. So I'm a strong advocate of not using post-communism, I never use it. And sometimes I do think that those who use it wish to gain more attention, because it hits bigger; mostly Western scholars or those East European scholars who live abroad use this terminology.

I even make distinction between "post-socialist" and "post-soviet" experience, but lots of scholars do not see any differences between them. I visited the Soviet Union many times, and I spent half a year as a visiting student in Moscow. So I knew it from the inside that there was a huge difference between the two types of socialism. I agree with Krista Kodres, an Estonian art historian, who also differentiates between these terms. As for my book, I use "post-post-communism" as a subtitle, but not as my term. It summarizes a subchapter in which I speak about the ideas of the American political scientist Charles King, who works with this term.[3] He argues that the twenty-seven "post-communist" countries are so different from one another that it is no longer possible to discuss them simply within the same interpretative framework. King believes that in the new era, which he designates as "post-post-communism," the strikingly different visions and realities of each country rather than the common socialist past will be the basis for comparison.

3 Charles KING, "Post-Postcommunism: Transition, Comparison, and the End of ‚Eastern Europe'," *World Politics*, Vol. 53, 2000, No. 1, pp. 143–172.

DG: There's a huge topic also in terms of the unrealized capacity of communism. We could point to works by visual artists and to some texts by philosophers like Mark Fisher, Franco Berardi or Ciprian Mureşan who simply analyze communism as unfinished, unrealized utopia and in these terms to use "post-communism" is not logical too. But let's go back to your book and your ideas. You argue that from the point of view of art and its practice, the concept of cultural trauma represents a theoretical framework that can help illuminate numerous social phenomena. Or even be a means of understanding the social and political problems of the period of post-socialist transformation. The first part of your book is built more, as I see it, on the parallels between psychoanalysis, psychotherapy and social or cultural phenomena. You use the notion of cultural trauma there, as we talked about earlier. The second part of the book is more situated on sociological insights into culture and also imagination and art. You claim that the transformation period meant replacing the phrases of international socialism with nationalist authoritarianism. What was the role of the supposed belief in an ideology that in fact only masked economic goals and corruption played in this?

EA: There is a huge difference between being a witness to a process about which we do not know where it will lead us and looking back from today when we already clearly see the path leading to a dead-end. Yes, I believe the different approach is adequate to the change in the history, but it also correlates with my radicalization. In Hungary, the ruling right-wing regime changed the notion of the reality we live in. The physically experienced reality was somehow substituted by an imagined alternative reality. Some regimes have such a good, devilishly good strategy to brainwash society. First it seemed that what was happening was due to a nationalist policy. But this is only one element of the regime's operation, and like all elements, it is adapted to political needs. So I believe that this regime could very well synchronize itself with the processes that are going on in

the world, they just follow it and make a local version of it and naturalize it. The regime puts a lot of emphasis on the propaganda machine and communication and relies on that to build an illusionary world that clashes with the everyday experience, but it still works. People are getting poorer and poorer, there is a huge inflation, the biggest in Europe, the health system is in ruins, education is disastrous, absolutely disastrous. People feel it on their skin, but they still accept living in this illusionary bubble.

So I would say yes, the framework is nationalism, a tool to hypnotize the masses. For example, the constant hatemongering and the creation of enemies to keep the population alert. As the rhetoric goes, we fought against the Habsburgs, against the Russians, and today against Brussels. At the same time, the regime is complaining that it is not getting the EU money it is entitled to. This communication has somehow replaced the everyday reality. I believe that trauma is connected to the actual, physical experience, and today it is not the case, it is no longer an appropriate concept to interpret life after 2010. Now the framework is nationalism, but as a smokescreen; it is a hypnotic element. What kind of reality is it in which we are in the EU and at the same time we talk about Great Hungary? Reality and communication clash, but it works. It is more than just a replacement with the phrases of nationalism. Nationalism is a framework, but you can put many other things into it. Nationalism is needed to differentiate oneself, let's say, from the global world. And it is negotiated internally for the masses through the media, which is dominated by the government. From everywhere, from the television, from the newspaper, you hear the same. And the communication is unanimous, strategic and disciplined. The main element of nationalism, repetition, embedding, and constant "flagging" are utilized.

DG: Susan Buck-Morss analyzed utopia and the media communication during the rule of the Communist Party in

Soviet Union.[4] I was wondering what is different in the nationalist authoritarian regime currently in Hungary. It seems that the apparatus works in a very similar way but this ideology does not penetrate the whole society as in during the socialist regime, but it's a kind of simulacrum effect as I see it.

EA: Actually, in the Hungarian version of my book, when I was writing about public spaces, I used another theoretical framework. Katerina Clark wrote about Moscow as the fourth Rome,[5] it's a wonderful book, and she uses the term "imperial sublime," which she applies to the Stalinist era. Clark argues that the sublime is not necessarily spatial, but could be connected to time as well. The rhetoric of the 1930s, generating constant fear and horror, was a kind of sublime, she believes, so that communication was adapted to the harsh reality of purges and show trials and executions. And I draw on Nicholas Mirzoeff, who claims that sometimes phrases can change the trajectory of time.[6] For example, when the Haitian revolution succeeded, the new constitution began with the phrase, "Slavery is abolished forever." And he argues that this phrase erased slavery in the past retroactively, but also in the future. So he argues for certain moments when one can feel the future and the past in a present moment. In his concept, it is not only possible to project utopia into the future, but it also works in the opposite direction – to live through the past in the present. And I argue that nationalism also relies on this sublime, and I call it "nationalist sublime." The newly erected *Memorial to Alliance* (2020) nearby Kossuth Square in Budapest serves this purpose. So in a way – to answer

4 Susan BUCK-MORSS, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe. The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Cambridge MA – London: MIT Press 2000.

5 Katerina CLARK, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941,* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 2011.

6 Nicolas MIRZOEFF, *The Right to Look. A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Durham: Duke University Press 2011.

your question – they do use very similar methods. Chantal Mouffe speaks wonderfully about affect as a tool in the hands of populists. Affect could not only be a rhetorical method, but for me it could be a visual element as well. This memorial also gets the "affect" in motion, and there are people crying and others are looking for their town among thousands of towns and villages of the historical Kingdom of Hungary, which are listed on the memorial walls. So the national memorial uses the sublime, uses affect, just the orientation has changed.

DG: You want to say it is almost theatrical.

EA: Yes, absolutely.

DG: I would like to move on to another question about contemporary art and solidarity. In your analysis of contemporary art, you deal a lot with imagination, language, and the reading of public space. I am particularly interested in the motifs of erasure and amnesia. You believe that art is an excellent weapon against ghosts and specters, as well as being an effective means of mourning and expressing loss, regardless of whether we find the socialist past appealing or repulsive. The artist, according to your interpretation, is a kind of social agent who takes on the role of healer and proposes effective healing methods. How do you see the effectiveness of artistic solidarity in the civic and cultural sphere, the creation of an active network of civic activists, artists, cultural workers? Should this solidarity somehow also go beyond the borders of our countries?

EA: It's a tough but very important question. Yes, I would like to believe in the power of art. I wish to believe in it. But there is a very strong countercurrent as well, working against it. Cultural policy has been so diabolically clever. As I say, step by step, very patiently, the official power invaded and occupied all the fields, all the means. At the beginning of the 2010s, there was no sign of it. In one

survey on regime cultural policies, everybody said, oh, there is no cultural politics, don't worry about it. The contours or the tendency were not yet visible. The method was this slowness. The regime was in no hurry, and very patiently it invaded the field of culture.

PM: Like the "normalization" process here in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s.

EA: Most likely! And because it was so slow, and because they focused only on one area at a time, solidarity did not develop. This is the sad reality, the division worked well. First of all, the Hungarian National Gallery was incorporated into the Museum of Fine Arts. And outside of the field of fine arts, nobody understood what all the fuss was about. Or take the example of Kunsthalle – it was taken over by the Hungarian Art Academy (MMA), the newly established, very conservative art institution with enormous power and huge subsidies which was boycotted by contemporary artists and art professionals, but representatives of literary life, writers, poets had no problem holding book launches or other events there. So the different fields of culture were simply disjointed and divided. Only one field was attacked at a time and the others were like: okay, this is their business, not ours. Next it was literature, then pop music, and then theater. And due to these "salami tactics," solidarity could not develop from the very beginning and it is still a problem today.

PM: It is quite often the case that different art professional circles act separately. "Divide et impera" is a very old strategy. You named a number of different examples of politically engaged artworks in the book. They were often individual efforts and they didn't know about each other. In the book you demonstrated and compared them all side by side, but I don't think that's the reality in normal life, let alone the different time of their origins.

EA: Fortunately, most of the works analyzed in the second part of the book were displayed in the *Private Nationalism* and *Universal Hospitality* exhibitions.[7] Both were quite a success, very well attended, although the first one in Hungary had no official advertising or coverage, yet somehow people heard about it and even writers, poets and historians came to visit it. And since we did not have a catalog, I thought it was a must to include the exhibited works in this book, at least to preserve their memory.

And there is another thing – today, contemporary critical art has absolutely no visibility. And not only that. The most frightening thing for me is that the Hungarian Art Academy (MMA), which at first was the flagship institution of this new national, conservative cultural policy, has been now somehow accepted, and even the most critical intellectuals say: there is no problem with them, they are toothless lions, why should we not accept the money they offer, if it is public money from the taxpayer? And they have lots of money. Having gained power, the institution now wants to earn respectability in the scene and intellectual legitimacy. So they invite the best people in the culture, who slowly infiltrate into the institution, collaborate with it, and thus make it legitimate and normalize it. It is a very dangerous process.

This attitude disperses society, and more and more people accept the new and rearranged institutions. The reason is that there is hardly any institution that can operate independently, outside of the NER (National Collaboration System) system, and also because most people are existentially dependent on the system and want to save their position, they see no other way, so more and more people accept the regime. The directors of cultural institutions are no longer professionals. It is even written in the law that a museum director, for example, does not have to have

7 *Imagined Communities, Personal Imaginations. Private Nationalism*, curator Edit András, Budapest: Budapest Gallery – Kiscelli Museum 2015; *Universal Hospitality. Into the City*, curators Edit András, Birgit Lurz, Ilona Németh, Wolfgang Schlag, Vienna: Altepost 2016.

a special diploma or education, so if you look around today, museum directors are managers or political commissars. They are concerned with the image of the country and boosting tourism with blockbuster shows.

DG: So in this situation resistance and solidarity would be really hard.

EA: I believe it's over. What can I say? I do not see any sign of resistance anymore. There is a kind of underground, invisible small grassroots groups, but even professionals hardly know about it. I believe this selfish, introverted attitude, which was characteristic of Hungarian artists, that is, everybody was preoccupied with their own concerns and fears, was a huge mistake.

DG: In the second part of the book you also deal with technologies of power and public space. It seems to me that you are interested, for example, in relation to the work of Szabolcs KissPál, in analyzing the religious character of political belief, which changes public space and constructs a kind of – as you write – ironed-out history. Isn't it precisely the aspect of the mythologization of history (Slovakia being the most extreme example today) in which it is possible to see certain parallels in post-socialist countries?

EA: You are absolutely right. If nationalism served as a kind of substitute for religion at the time of the birth of the nation, something similar is happening today at the time of the rebirth of the nation, or the re-nationalization of the post-socialist countries. In comparison to the 19th century, in our days it is the godless religion of communism that is substituted by mythologies, by the imagined greatness.

PM: And where do you see the similarities between these new state party mechanisms or ideologies and the rule of the Communist Party? Are there any major differences you can point out? Or is it just that the content has changed?

EA: It's a very good question. I believe it's a mixture. The new populist regimes also use inherited tools. For example, the image of a leader who embodies the favorite characteristics of the nation and is very close to the people, especially to traditional rural populations (even the jargon they use is for "villagers"). But at the same time, it is an updated, digital version of the "analog" methods of the state socialist party. For example, there is no need for censorship, because if you put your own loyal people in leading positions, they will take care of principles, directions, messages. The self-censorship inherited from socialism is also very much in operation. It is not just the change of the content, because feudalism is also back. The names and ranks are back, like the old name for the county (vármegye), or the re-introduction of a new-old name for its leader (főispán), obergespan. Recently, a draft law on the total "Gleichschaltung" of culture came out. Accordingly, a few directors, a few trustworthy "overlords" will supervise all the museums of the country in a kind of tributary system, through the chain of "vassals." This means that even the smallest unit is obliged to share its professional plans and report on the results, including all financial, professional and human resources issues. If not real, then virtual, unspoken "fealty" is the obligation of loyalty that the "tenant" owes to the "lord." Loyalty, not professionalism, is what counts in this feudal system. All in all, feudalism, socialism, nationalism, populism and high-tech media communication are mixed together. The illiberal state selects the best tool from the toolbox that is appropriate to deal with or handle or solve a particular situation.

PM: What can an individual do in this situation?

EA: I think it is very important to keep the critical attitude alive, and at least to keep the critical potential and analysis to avoid compromise, assimilation or identification. When someone gives up, one loses moral capacity, as compromise has a price to pay. If your book is published

by MMA or by a publishing house of the NER, you should follow their directives, the guideline must be adopted, consciously or not. For example, do not mention sensitive spots, political issues and most of all, do not criticize the system. It is very difficult for young professionals with kids who are responsible for their families. The psychological mechanism is that these people will explain to themselves that this is a pragmatic solution, and will unconsciously identify with the system, and close the skeletons in the closets. At least being aware of what is happening is very important.

DG: My next question is about the enemies. It's somehow connected because in the rhetoric of nationalism, there are always inner enemies like liberals, queer people, internationalized art. Contemporary artists are also somehow enemy, but quite invisible, and critical people, like oppositional journalists. So I wanted somehow to draw a comparison between nationalisms in Central Europe. As I see it, it is now Slovakia… When I read your book, I immediately recognized the beginnings of the same thing. And I was really frightened and I thought, wow, this book is really instrumental for me because I understand now what they are going to do…

EA: Here I would like to get back to one of the questions, which was posed yesterday during the book launch. How is it possible that despite the traditional anti-Soviet sentiment in Hungary the country has such a close friendship with Putin? It is because the 1956 Revolution was pushed aside and out of the picture. It is no longer in the common language. And also because we have new enemies. Hot and fresh enemies – let's say George Soros, Brussels, the LGBTQI+ community, liberals, the "dollar–left" as the opposition is labelled, etc. There are new enemies all the time. And this constant hate-mongering works absolutely well. Yes, this is another engine of this neo-nationalism and you do not have to have only communists.

DG: In fact, today we live in times when authoritarian politicians talk about protecting their citizens by erecting mental and physical borders, anti-immigration fences, etc. You write about it in relation to the *Universal Hospitality* exhibition. Segregation walls, for example in Slovakia, between Roma and the majority. You also write about the works of artists who have a dual national identity, Romanian and Hungarian or Slovak and Hungarian. From the position of these artists' works, the borders seem to be imposed, perhaps even superfluous. Do you consider national borders as functional or anachronistic when thinking about the future of Europe?

EA: In answering, I will come back to your earlier question about whether post-national solidarity can exist. Yes, definitely! So to answer the question what an individual can do, this is the second condition. The first is to maintain critical potentiality. And that is somehow the advantage of art. In one way or another, art always reflects what is happening. I do believe that post-national, cross-national or transnational, you name it, solidarity is absolutely something that could get us out of this situation. So yes, all kinds of borders are absolutely anachronistic. The perspective of those artists, who work in both scenes, is very important, because ethnic minorities were also manipulated and estranged from the citizens of the host-countries. And that is why I am an advocate of regionalism and regional solidarity, because it is a kind of force that can work against nationalism.

DG: Looking further east to the war in Ukraine, is nationalism something transitory or do you see it as the definite framework of the post-socialist geopolitical space, something unavoidable for us?

EA: I would put it differently and look for what is similar in all parts of East-Central Europe. John Connelly, an

American historian wrote a book on Eastern Europe[8] and was strongly attacked at the book-launch at the Central European University because he treats Eastern Europe as one region. It was a very interesting discussion. He has a very good argument that it is not about territory, it is not about where we live. It is not even similarity of language, but rather similar historical experiences. He does not get into details of the similarities, but I would say that unlike Western Europe, the countries in this part of Europe do not have smooth transitions from one phase of history to another one. Their trajectories are full of ruptures, new beginnings, and setbacks. So the course of the history is very different.

When we talk about healing, this is something we never have enough time for – before we could heal or digest our wounds we are already in another situation. That means a different chronology – that is why I started to deal with chronopolitics instead of geopolitics. Let's say, when the theory of decoloniality uses the slogan "return to the past," it obviously refers to the pre-colonization time. But as far as we are concerned, the question is – to which past to return to? To Czechoslovakia, or to the Austro-Hungarian monarchy? It is not only that East and West histories are different, but histories are different within the East as well. For example, what Hungarians consider a tragedy is a celebration of the birth of the nation in other countries, like Slovakia, Czechoslovakia. And with all these different perspectives, we cannot simply follow the cutting edge decolonial discourse.

PM: As a part of your collaboration with the Igor Zabel Foundation you wrote a study on Piotr Piotrowski's concept of horizontal art history, in which he argues that it is necessary to develop a transnational discourse and to

8 John CONNELLY, *From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2020.

emphasize the position from which we now read the art history.[9] How do you see Piotrowski's legacy for contemporary art history writing today?

EA: I do find it very important and on many points I agree with him and I try to continue his legacy, proposing this transnational and regional aspect. After the collapse of the socialist system the privileged position of the "close other," as the region was called, was disappearing because in the globalized world many more marginal positions wanted to be acknowledged. We never discussed it directly but somehow he always wanted to put the region on the map because he believed that the art here is so very intriguing, rich and so very different. So the dilemma was, how to write art history of the region to generate interest from outside without compromising its locality and how to involve it in the world wide debate, how to secure East European art a position within world art. And there was also a fear that simply because it is still European art, it will be treated as something that is over, passé, and the region within would be a kind of collateral loss.

PM: But how do you perceive the fact that, despite all the efforts of many, be it Piotr Piotrowski, yourself, Clara Kemp-Welch, or others who work on Central and East European art history after World War II, it still plays such a marginal role in global art history? In your book you ask rhetorically: "Could it be possible that this region does not contribute in any way to the global art world, and to general discourse on account of its incompatibility?" Why do you think the region is still so marginalized despite the strength and originality of the works produced in its milieu?

9 Edit ANDRÁS, "Horizontal Art History: Endangered Species," in: Agata JAKUBOWSKA – Magdalena RADOMSKA (eds.), *Horizontal Art History and Beyond. Revising Peripheral Critical Practices*, London – New York: Routledge 2022, pp. 145–155.

EA: I do not see the situation as that bad. I am aware that there are many books being prepared now, for example with Routledge. There are now two or three in the pipeline. Another thing is that Piotrowski's theory is open to modification, and that is its strength, that it is not a rigid and closed theory, supposed to stay the same forever. He was always alert, following the discourse and adjusting his theory accordingly. Many would say that he was inconsistent – I say no, absolutely not! He just realized that this marginalized region has to be constantly alert and look for what the question is that we should reply to in changing conditions; the question is always different and that is why he kept changing the name of the framework for his theory. Another thing – and this was my problem – was that there was a kind of optimistic, romantic, undoubted naivety in the theory. When I suggested that it might be wishful thinking, he seriously argued: no, no, it's reality. He wanted to believe in it. But I was skeptical, why would somebody in a position of power give up that privileged position? His argument was that we see much better on the margins than in the center, while I argued in my book that it is a kind of competition as well. If we simplify it, the West wishes to acknowledge the margins, but how? Western institutions, museums want to collect and cover "world art history," and not just the centers, all the leading institutions are afraid of losing their positions of power, so they run to be one step ahead of this process and they start to study and collect artworks from everywhere; it's a clever policy. This is fine but these institutions wish to write the art history as well. That's why it's important to write and publish in English – now there is also an openness in the publishing houses, because they feel the need to understand this region as well.

MŠ: I'm curious about the use of the word "regional." Actually, what do we call this region? You usually talk about Central and Eastern Europe, but for many intellectuals in the Czech Republic, particularly the term Central Europe is very distinctive because they like the idea that they don't

really belong to the East, but yet they are not in the West either. It used to be very important, for instance, for Milan Kundera, his famous essay begins with a reflection of the Hungarian tragedy of 1956. But that was back in 1980s. Recently, Donald Tusk said he would first go to Berlin and Paris because he's interested in this axis Warsaw, Berlin, Paris, and not the old Visegrád axis. So what do you think about the concept of Central Europe today?

EA: I believe that the terminology has its own history as well as the motivation behind it. During the Cold War, the naming was very important to be separated within the "gray zone" of the East Block. It was an attempt to get some distinctiveness, because it was such a frustration that Bucharest and Budapest were mixed up and so on. So it was an internal process of differentiation. Later, after the collapse of the state socialist system, sub-regions were born out of the East Bloc, the Baltic, the Balkans… Before that, you could not hear the word Balkan in Yugoslavia or anywhere else in Europe – and then the so-called Balkan exhibitions mushroomed. So everybody wanted to position themselves for the West. Central Europe equated with the Visegrád countries – but as you said, it does not really work anymore. And we can go back, pace Piotrowski, to the usage of terminology of Central-Eastern Europe and the change to East-Central Europe, which also shows a distinction within which there is a slight difference. But there is definitely a tendency that Eastern Europe was a political and ideological terminology within which sub-regions wanted to get out to separate themselves from the Bloc.

MŠ: But we still share something…

EA: When I speak about the region, I refer to the similar historical experiences. Balkans may say that they differ from us, but they also experienced state socialism. Although they flirted with capitalism, it was a mixture, still, they also had a relationship with socialism – artists

like Sanja Iveković and Zofia Kulik talk about it as a utopia they longed for; they were not against socialism, but against the way it was realized, they wanted a better socialism. So I would define the region not as a geographical unit, but through a very similar historical experience, like the experience of socialism, or the experience of belonging to empires. In so-called Western Europe, there were distinct sovereign nation states with a long history, while here the legacy of multinational empires is not so distant in time. And this legacy also means collaboration with or attention to each other, it is not all bad. Take, for example, the Zona festival in Timisoara from 1993–2002 in relation to Transylvania. The focus was not on some nostalgic Hungarian paradise, but on a flourishing multiethnic cultural collaboration, which is also a legacy.

So what defines our region is this similar historical experience that we were speaking about before, and also the turbulences, that the transitions from one historical formation to another were not very smooth. We have a lot of luggage to carry over, including a little luggage from feudalism, because it did not end, it was only semi-passed.

PM: What do you think are the most important tasks for East European art history or Central European art history today? You mentioned publishing in English, that's definitely the key. But I haven't seen that many exhibitions that deal with the region on an international scale. Or are there some other things we should think about, concentrate on?

EA: Yes, you are right, there are not many exhibitions dedicated to the region nowadays. There are waves, as interest goes up and then down. From the methodological perspective, I do find it very important to keep what could be called – with reference to Piotr Piotrowski – alertness. For example, it could be hazardous if people who go to work in some Western institution make a career out of East European art without doing any substantial research, just by gathering local knowledge and following global trends.

So local scholars also need to know what's going on in the discourse, otherwise they will be exploited.

In Hungary, many art historians are against theory. They do not deal with methodological or theoretical issues, they are not even interested in the questions raised by Piotrowski. So I do find very important not just the knowledge of language, but also following the discourse. If we use the discourse of yesterday or the day before, it just feels like an outdated phraseology; we have to know new trends, not because we have to adapt them immediately without really thinking about them, but because we need to check out whether we can use them or not, and to make comparisons. That work I do find very important, otherwise Piotrowski's fear that regional art history will be swallowed up by European history could come true. That is why we need this constant radar and balance between the local (thorough microfilological knowledge) and the theoretical, with the help of which we can make our art history intriguing and attractive for an international audience. It is also a possible career path to use local knowledge and put it into this theoretical framework. But today there is no connection between the two groups, between local knowledge producers and those who transform this knowledge into up-to-date narratives. The optimal situation would be to have people who both have thorough local knowledge and follow the discourse and write in English.

Education is also very important. Unfortunately, fewer and fewer people are studying art history in Hungary, not just because the discipline is in crisis worldwide, but also because the curriculum is quite conservative. The strict, positivist Prussian method was a kind of resistance policy during socialism, not to be swallowed by ideology and politics, so it was a method to save professional integrity. Now it backfires. Young students prefer to go to the media department, communication department, etc. To change education is very important. If someone wants to deal with contemporary art history in a competitive way, they have to go to study abroad. And when they go, they lack the local

knowledge. Finally, translations are also vital because they give a different perspective through which we can look back at our scene; comparativeness is wonderful.

PM: I also think that we really need to communicate much more and do the comparative work within the region. That's something that has really changed from the 1990s, from the transformation period, when everybody was aiming at the West, at "the center," and we were like on parallel highways next to each other. And I would say now we should just find regional roots and connect and compare; that's our task.

EA: Absolutely. And that is why I went to the Zona festival organized by Ileana Pintilie and was very happy when I got the offer to translate my book into Czech. You're absolutely right that instead of national representations, the comparative transnational, regional endeavors should be promoted. I very much believe in this too.