

E

[illegible]

Editorial

*Martin Škabraha,
Marianna Placáková*

Martin Škabraha, Marianna Pláčková

In an interview published by *Notebook* in 2024, the Hungarian art historian Edit András described the methods by which the nationalist Fidesz regime brought the country's cultural institutions under its control, speaking also about ways to resist a similar threat. According to András, two conditions must be met: "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. [As for the second condition,] I do believe that post-national, international, 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."¹

While editing the texts for this issue, like many others, we followed Hungary's parliamentary elections with great anticipation, as the era of Viktor Orbán appeared to be approaching its (definitive?) end. Although *Notebook* focuses on theories and histories of art after 1945 in their broader socio-cultural contexts, the very existence of a scholarly print journal devoted to such topics is tied to state cultural policy, which is itself shaped by wider social structures. The outcome of the Hungarian parliamentary elections was therefore, for us as well, a sign of possible future developments, at least within Central Europe.

That the "illiberal-democratic" tendencies that have profoundly shaped understandings of the role of culture and art in society are not confined to Hungary is demonstrated by the opening study by Ondřej Horák and Andrea Kaňkovská. Their article examines the impact of different cultural policies on museum and gallery institutions in Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia, as well as the resulting changes in staffing and programming between 2010 and 2025. As the authors conclude: "The lessons drawn from

the experiences of the other Visegrád countries do not lead to the simple conclusion that culture must be protected from political intervention. Rather, they point to the need to understand that the cultural field is continually shaped by power relations that cannot be entirely eliminated—only made more transparent, slowed down, and distributed in such a way that changes of political regime do not disrupt fundamental institutional continuity, above all continuity in staffing."

The comparative analysis of the three Visegrád countries does not include the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, the study will inevitably be read in the context of current debates—and often critical responses—to the cultural policy of the new Czech government, which until recently openly aligned itself with the government of Viktor Orbán.

What accounts for the similarities in political trends across the Visegrád countries? One possible explanation frequently invoked in public discourse is their shared historical experience of state socialism, which was characterized, among other things, by the reshaping of cultural and educational institutions to meet the ideological demands of an authoritarian regime.

Zuzana Krišková's article focuses on one particular phase of the Czechoslovak socialist regime, namely the period of Normalization, at Prague's Academy of Fine Arts. The article examines the various types of power relations that, at the institutional level, shaped staffing policies within the art world. The article seeks to answer why, compared to other art academies in Czechoslovakia, the post-1968 purges had a relatively limited impact at the Academy, allowing AVU to maintain a considerable degree of staff continuity. Artists and academic administrators such as František Jiroudek, Karel Souček, and Arnošt Paderlík, however, ultimately paid a price for this achievement. Through their political engagement, these individuals became closely associated—both personally and artistically—with the socialist regime. When the regime collapsed, they fell symbolically with it. The "official" art of the period

1 Daniel GRŮŇ – Pavlína MORGANOVÁ – Martin ŠKABRAHA, "Solidarity Could Get Us Out of This Situation: An Interview with Edit András," *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, Vol. 18, 2024, No. 36, p. 181.

was condemned as having supported the regime and was thus effectively treated as a form of collaboration—a dark chapter never to be repeated.

Are present-day authoritarian tendencies really rooted in enduring patterns from the era of state socialism? After all, similar crises are also emerging in countries without this historical burden, as demonstrated most notably by the United States under the Trump administration, which, it should be noted, maintained unusually close ties with the above-mentioned Orbán government. A fact to consider is that we have now been “post-communist” for almost as long as we were “communist.” We should therefore pay attention not only to the ways in which our historical experience differs from that of Western countries, but also to what we have in common with them today. Viewed in this light, another explanation suggests itself: the extreme concentration of power in the hands of a small group of the most influential corporations and their owners.

A perspective on this issue is offered by Jiří Melzmuf. In his article on the “material basis of photography,” Melzmuf employs the conceptual apparatus of classical Marxism. For some readers, this framework may seem as outdated as the art of the Normalization period. However, Melzmuf demonstrates that this approach remains a vital analytical tool, capable of uncovering hidden connections behind the seemingly effortless overproduction of visual content that inundates us on social media and other digital platforms. According to the author, this apparent emancipation of photography from “matter” serves primarily to “conceal the drastic exploitation of natural resources and human labor, rendering it invisible and more difficult to challenge.”

Yet it is not only the reproduction of visual content that is technologically—and therefore also politically and economically—mediated in contemporary society. Reproduction in a far more intimate sense, namely the biological continuation of the human species, is likewise subject to technological intervention. In her article, Denisa

Michalínová examines contemporary artistic projects that variously engage with and imagine ectogenesis, the development of a fetus outside the human body. Through specific examples, including the installation *UNBORN0X9* and works by the collective Keiken, the author traces both the history of and contemporary thinking about this technology. She considers its potential to function either as a tool of emancipation or, conversely, as a mechanism that could reinforce existing inequalities among different marginalized social groups.

The capacity of art to realize and help us experience such dilemmas is an example of the critical potential that Edit András referred to at the beginning of this editorial. Although discussions of art exhibitions often revolve around the notion of spectatorship, which for many people implies passive reception of carefully staged content, encounters with art—even in traditional exhibition formats—can be far more open-ended.

Drawing on the concept of the chronotope, Eva Skopalová approaches the exhibition as a spatial medium in which movement is not merely passage from one pre-determined point to another, but a means of co-creating the meanings that artworks acquire. Through her analysis of the exhibitions *a-Historische klanken* (1988) and *Doba Karla IV. v dějinách národů ČSSR* (The Era of Charles IV in the Histories of the Peoples of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, 1978), both of which employed polytemporal combinations of works from different historical periods, she presents exhibitions as discursive media capable of articulating non-linear conceptions of time through the specific constellation of artifacts they bring together. According to Skopalová, this approach offers valuable inspiration for both contemporary curatorial practice and art-historical thinking.

A case in point is the book reviewed by Tomáš Murár in the final contribution to the fortieth issue of *Notebook*. Milena Bartlová's two-volume *Dějiny českých dějin umění* (History of Czech Art History, Prague: UMPRUM 2020,

2025) examines the history of the discipline between 1945 and 1989. Although in the introductions to the volumes Bartlová aligns herself with an ambitious theoretical framework, Murár argues that her account ultimately remains, despite its wealth of archival material and factual detail, a largely positivist description of institutions, publication activities, and the relationships among individual actors, rather than a genuinely theory-driven analysis of how ways of thinking about art were formed. At the same time, the reviewer acknowledges that Bartlová is by no means alone in this regard, as this tendency is fairly widespread within the Czech scholarly community.

History is never merely a chronology. Traces of the past are always viewed through the lens of the present and can therefore appear in entirely new and historically “inappropriate” contexts, much as occurs within the logic of the chronotope. Artworks liberated from the fixed temporal order of the white wall can, through our experience of space, enter into new configurations, transcend their customary framing, and open up new, unexpected perspectives—perspectives both aesthetic and political. In this sense, borders truly are an anachronism.