

## **Soviet Art Historiography under a Magnifying Glass<sup>1</sup>**

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The conference 'Socialist Internationalism & the Global Contemporary: Transnational Art Historiographies from Eastern and East-Central Europe', held in Leipzig 23–25 November 2017, was organised by Marina Dmitrieva and Beáta Hock from the GWZO (*Leibniz-Institut für Geschichte und Kultur des östlichen Europa*) and Antje Kempe (University of Greifswald), in cooperation with the Chair of Art History of Eastern Europe at the Humboldt University of Berlin (Michaela Marek), and the Institute of Art History and Visual Culture at the Estonian Academy of Arts (Krista Kodres and Kristina Jõekalda). This team has set the goal of exploring the writing of art histories under socialist conditions from multiple perspectives in a series of scholarly events and publications. This year's conference was the second in the series, begun a year earlier in Tallinn with the conference 'Art History and Socialism(s) after World War II: The 1940s until the 1960s'.

This time the focus was on the multiple ways of interpreting 'socialist internationalism' within the practice of art history. Whereas the 2016 Tallinn conference focused mainly on the art of the previous centuries, this year the topics were centred around contemporary or 20th-century art and its criticism. The two exceptions among the presented papers were delivered by Ivan Gerát on Soviet interpretations of Christian iconography and the ways of legitimising this field of study, and Olga Etinhof on Soviet Russian research on Byzantine art. The concentration on 20th-century art was intensified by

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the fact that sadly not all speakers listed in the programme<sup>2</sup> were present at the actual event: Adam Mayer, Mari Laanemets, Michaela Marek and Krista Kodres were unable to attend. The latter two papers were summarised by others.

Many intriguing topics that have been considered insignificant in previous research were raised and discussed. Not all of these focused on historiographical issues. The fact that there were several participants with academic backgrounds outside art history was refreshing and raised different kinds of questions, which sometimes revealed that our understandings of basics can be rather dissimilar.

Questioning the centres and the existing periodisation, but also highlighting the vast contribution of single outstanding personalities in this system, were the reoccurring features of the event. As the CFP suggested, the history of exhibitions (by Anthony Gardner, Elena Sharnova and Matteo Bertelé) and of international forums/congresses was addressed in several rich papers (by Corinne Geering and Virve Sarapik). Éva Forgács and Igor Dukhan introduced their readings of contemporaneity and internationalism in art. Nikolas Drosos touched upon the canon and definitions of Realist art, identifying two tendencies: unity in global Realism, and locating differences (‘national in form, socialist in content’) by means of classic stylistic analysis. It should be mentioned that of the forms of artistic expression, painting was clearly dominant in the conference. Art criticism was most thoroughly approached in the paper by Maja & Reuben Fowkes. By the way, many speakers used the opportunity to highlight the fact of over-emphasising artists’ or art historians’ trips abroad in previous historiography.

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<sup>2</sup> See the full programme on the GWZO webpage: [http://research.uni-leipzig.de/gwzo/images/GWZO\\_images/Konferenzen/17\\_KI\\_VG\\_Socialist\\_Internationalism.pdf](http://research.uni-leipzig.de/gwzo/images/GWZO_images/Konferenzen/17_KI_VG_Socialist_Internationalism.pdf) (accessed 9 December 2017)

In the intimate atmosphere of the seminar, heated discussions occurred. Joint discussions at the end of each panel contributed to this greatly. The final discussion was led by Katja Bernhard, Robert Born and the three organisers, and it kept going long after the end of the official programme. If anything in this multi-layered and indeed thought-provoking event could be criticised, it would be the very broad scope of the conference. How to define 'socialist internationalism' or the 'global contemporary' beyond the context of well-known slogans such as the 'friendship of nations', or 'unity in diversity'? As Éva Forgács pointed out, 'socialist internationalism' was more an ideal, a theory, than a real practice.

At the same time, the broad focus allowed for highly intriguing far-away aspects of this polycentric world to be introduced, such as art of Mexico (Piotr Juszkiewicz), Angola (Nadine Siegert) and North Korea (Douglas Gabriel & Adri Kácsor) on their 'path of socialism'. As a deformed mirror image, exporting socialism to such distant cultures brings to mind the persistent attempts to adapt Western-born theories to research on East European art.

Besides, there were plenty of common denominators, such as primitiveness, folklorism and vernacularism, which were rendered in different contexts, from nationalism to exoticism. Krista Kodres even named the wide-spread engagement with areas that we would now categorise as visual art an escapist side-effect of the Soviet censorship. Typical of discussions involving Soviet studies, Piotr Piotrowski kept coming up in the papers, as well as the internationally renowned Mikhail Alpatov who remained completely marginal inside Soviet Russia, or György Lukács and Viktor Lazarev, not to mention the obligatory quotes from Marx and Lenin as the Soviet equivalent of 'footnote no. 1 syndrome'.

It became evident from the papers that during the Soviet era the common languages in East Europe were most often German and French – luckily for the regions whose

professional languages these had continued to be –, not Russian, as one might expect. The language issue was specifically addressed by Krista Kodres’s paper on the principles of translating books. Perhaps the most provocative discussions took place over the Soviet-era publications and exhibitions that introduced most progressive Western art between the lines, hidden behind severe (but sometimes faked) criticism.

One of the goals of the (series of) event(s) was to provide a platform for discussing similar questions, research on which usually remains behind the curtain of small local languages, not understood internationally, and several speakers credited the success of this conference as a step in overcoming this pervasive problem. It is too often the case that nothing is known internationally of certain wonderful studies that have been carried out because the results have not been published in English/German, or they have but not in the influential publications that reach a wide readership. Yet the existence of a random selection of publications can sometimes create the illusion of an exaggerated presence of specific artistic phenomena (such as the local impact of certain avant-garde movements) in international comparison. The conference was full of small surprises for anyone familiar with the restrictions of the Soviet world, e.g. the kinds of books and exhibitions that were possible despite the many limitations.



The final discussion: Katja Bernhardt, Beáta Hock, Marina Dmitrieva, Antje Kempe and Robert Born. *Photo by K. J.*