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Narratives and Places of Cultural Opposition in the Visual Arts

Introduction:

Acquisition Policies and the Politics of Neo-Avantgarde Art

Framing the Yugoslav, Polish, and German case studies on the complex relationship between official cultural policies and the forces of cultural opposition, I attempt to outline the aesthetical and political conditions of collecting and interpreting modernist and neo-Avantgarde visual art in the former Eastern Bloc.¹ From a global perspective, it is tempting to declare that communist parties came to power and Sovietized the cultural institutions and discourses with a Stalinist program in the “liberated” (but also occupied) region of the Eastern Bloc after World War II. According to the Zhdanov doctrine, the “democratic,” socialist countries led by the Soviet Union opposed the “anti-democratic” and “imperialist” forces of the West in the field of culture. All art deviating from the Soviet principles of socialist realism were accused of undermining the communist power and the “peaceful” building of socialism. Accordingly, abstract, expressionist, and surrealist art were harshly criticized and persecuted as the accoutrements of capitalist, *l’art pour l’art*, bourgeois aesthetic politics, so these tendencies formed the basis of the (visual) cultural opposition that resisted the officially supported socialist realism. The rhetoric and politics of the communist Cultural Revolution, however, changed after Stalin’s death, when it became more or less de-Stalinized and modernized.

In the field of the visual arts, aesthetic and stylistic modernization took place in almost every country of the Eastern Bloc, though the intensity and various notions of modernity were differed slightly. In Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania, aesthetic modernization was based on the recuperation of Cubism and Constructivism, while in the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, and the GDR abstract art was harshly criticized until the 1980s due to its strong aesthetic ties to Western art and ideology. In the Soviet Union and the GDR, modernization meant the elaboration of a “contemporary style” based

1 I used the notion of neo-Avantgarde parallel with Maja Fowkes and Piotr Piotrowski, who adapted the Western criticism (Hal Foster, Benjamin H. Buchloh) of Peter Bürger’s distinction between aesthetic (autonomous) Modernism and socially engaged Avantgarde. See Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, and Fowkes, *The Green Bloc*.

on the reinterpretation and re-evaluation of Expressionism and critical Realism. In the second half of the 1950s, theoreticians and cultural politicians aimed to create a new, revolutionary, international socialist realism synthesizing the different styles of Mexican Muralism, Italian neo-Realism, German *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and Russian Expressionism. Before Stalin's death and during the Thaw, only one country had a different cultural climate on the communist side of Europe. Due to the Tito-Stalin split, Yugoslav cultural politics supported the leftist Avantgarde as soon as the early 1950s (EXAT 51), and thus, in this context, Avantgarde art constituted a particular "non-aligned" socialist art.²

In the 1960s, a sort of autonomous Modernism became the officially accepted and supported socialist art in Yugoslavia (as early as the 1950s), Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania (only in the second half of the 1960s). Accordingly, in these countries the Ministry of Culture and the state museums could acquire Modernist works of art which formerly (in the late 1940s and the early 1950s) were considered forms of cultural opposition. Despite the "normalizing" cultural tendencies of the Brezhnev era, Modernist art remained supported even in Czechoslovakia and Hungary in the 1970s, and this changed the meaning of cultural opposition. In the second half of the 1960s, new neo-Avantgarde artistic tendencies (Fluxus, Happening, and Conceptual art) emerged in Eastern Europe. These tendencies involved social and political engagement, which led to a critique of Modernism's aesthetic autonomy. Due to its activism and political orientation, the neo-Avantgarde posed a threat to the authoritarian regimes, so the forces of normalization turned against it. In the early 1970s, private exhibitions and galleries were officially sanctioned and banned in Czechoslovakia, and the cultural administration in Hungary closed exhibitions. In 1970, one of the pioneers of Slovak conceptual art, Rudolf Sikora, could still organize a neo-Avantgarde group exhibition in his own studio, but he did not get permission for a second one a year later. Because of the strict state control exerted by the state over art, a so-called second public sphere formed around neo-Avantgarde art's leading figures, who themselves became its "institutions."

The Hungarian Fluxus-oriented artist, György Galántai organized several neo-Avantgarde exhibitions in his (rented) studio (Chapel Studio of Balatonboglár) in a small town far from Budapest and strict cultural surveillance between 1971 and 1973. At the same time, neo-Avantgarde artists in Czechoslovakia and in Poland also preferred the less controlled countryside for their artistic work. In the spirit of Fluxus and conceptual art, these artists carefully documented their artistic activity. The exhibition documentations of Galántai

² The political notion of "non-aligned" is used here in a metaphorical sense. See Videkanić, "Non-Aligned Modernism."

became the basis of his Artpool Art Archive (established in 1979)³, which contains a lot of artwork (conceptual, mail art, and Fluxus pieces) by other artists as well. In a similar fashion, the Hungarian art historian László Beke's Archive⁴ is also based on his international network and his curatorial work. In 1971, he organized the first Hungarian conceptual art exhibition, and later he became the curator of the significant Hungarian alternative art center, the Young Artists' Studio (Fiatal Művészek Klubja) in Budapest. Beke was also contacted by the Polish organizers of NET, the conceptual artist Jarosław Kozłowski, and the art critic Andrzej Kostołowski, who sent their NET manifesto to more than 300 neo-Avantgarde artists and art critics in the West and in the East encouraging them to get in touch and undertake joint artistic ventures. In 1972, Kozłowski opened the Galeria Akumulatory 2 (Batteries 2 Gallery), which was connected to the University of Poznań as a semi-official exhibition place and which provided space for NET-based joint ventures.

The Thaw culture generally facilitated the deepening of East-West cultural relations, but Fluxus and Action art were opposed by the orthodox communist cultural policy and the "reformist" representatives of Socialist Modernism as well. In Hungary, Fluxus events were banned, and the secret service observed the artists and the participants. Despite the hostile official climate, Fluxus and Mail Art became a strong link between Ostkunst and Westkunst. The American "pope" of Fluxus, Lithuanian born George Maciunas, encouraged the Eastern European development of his artistic ideas and appointed Milan Knížák to serve as director of Fluxus East in 1966, in the year of the first Fluxfest in Prague, the first Fluxus concert in Vilnius (organized by Vytautas Landsbergis), and the first Happening in Hungary (*The Lunch – in memoriam Batu Khan*, conducted by Gábor Altorjay and Tamás Szentjóby). Alongside Fluxus and Avantgarde music, experimental film-making was also a significant terrain for neo-Avantgarde art practice in Poland (one might think of the Film Form Workshop or Warsztat Formy Filmowej) and Hungary (the Balázs Béla Stúdió)⁵ in the 1970s. In 1978, one of the founders of Warsztat Formy Filmowej, the film-maker and visual artist Józef Robakowski, also founded a neo-Avantgarde art gallery. His Galeria Wymiany (Exchange Gallery)⁶ in his own apartment focused on multimedia and intermedia experiments and drew on the artistic exchange of ideas and artworks, which eventually led to the emergence of one of the largest art archives in the region. Robakowski's activity also demonstrates

3 COURAGE Registry, s.v. "Artpool Art Collection", by Balázs Beöthy and Júlia Klaniczay, 2018. Accessed: October 07, 2018, doi: 10.24389/5123

4 COURAGE Registry, s.v. "Archive of László Beke", by Balázs Beöthy, 2018. Accessed: October 07, 2018.

5 COURAGE Registry, s.v. "Béla Balázs Studio Research Archive", by Balázs Beöthy, 2017. Accessed: October 07, 2018, doi: 10.24389/2099

6 COURAGE Registry, s.v. "Exchange Gallery", by Xawery Stanczyk, 2017. Accessed: October 07, 2018.

that the neo-Avantgarde of the 1970s did not really find its place even in the more liberal (more liberal than the Czechoslovak or the Hungarian) Polish art scene. Moreover, the leading figures of the Polish neo-Avantgarde (for instance Zofia Kulik, Przemysław Kwiek, and Paweł Freisler in Warsaw, Jerzy Ludwiński, Natalia LL, and Andrzej Lachowicz in Wrocław, and Robakowski in Łódź) defined their artistic positions in opposition to the “soft” Avantgarde and the autonomous Modernism of official art and institutions.

In Warsaw, Freisler criticized the *l’art pour l’art* program of the famous Galeria Foksal,⁷ while Kulik and Kwiek produced non-official art in their own apartment on the subject of their family life as a criticism of socialism as it existed and Realism. Their artist duo KwieKulik also documented meticulously their activity and actions, and this praxis became the foundation of the KwieKulik Archive⁸ (now in the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art, Museum Sztuki Nowoczesnej). Similarly, Hungarian, Czech, and Slovak artists were also making art (actions and exhibitions) in private or semi-official places (university clubs, academic research institutes, communist youth clubs). In the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Romania, and the GDR, it was practically impossible to pursue neo-Avantgarde art publicly, though a few private galleries existed in the GDR, but the artworks in these galleries consisted for the most part of Modernist art. Jürgen Schweinebraden alone established a specifically neo-Avantgarde EP (Einzig Private) Galerie in Berlin in his flat in 1974, but the Stasi constantly kept him under observation and sabotaged his work until he chose to immigrate to the FRG in 1980. Another intriguing undertaking was the Galerie Kühl in Dresden, which was led by Johannes Kühl, who exhibited and sold Modernist (mainly Expressionist) paintings and legitimated his activity through his collaboration with the Stasi. In the GDR or in the similarly strictly controlled Romania (where censorship and persecution by the secret police were matters of course), the neo-Avantgarde art as cultural opposition only existed in the private sphere in the 1970 and 1980s, and the materials of this form of cultural opposition were archived by networking artists like Robert Rehfeldt, Birger Jesch, and Joachim Stange, or Geta Brătescu and Ion Grigorescu, who focused on their own artistic activities.

In the culturally far more liberal Yugoslavia, even official art institutions such as the Student Cultural Centre (Studentski Kulturni Centar) in Belgrade provided space for neo-Avantgarde initiatives. Its Croatian version, the Galerija Studentskog Centar, even enjoyed the support of Božo Bek, the director of the Zagreb City Gallery of Contemporary Art (today’s Muzej Suvremene Umjetnosti, MSU), who was a significant socialist cadre with an excellent re-

7 COURAGE Registry, s.v. “Foksal Gallery”, by Piotr Szenajch, 2018. Accessed: October 07, 2018. (forthcoming)

8 COURAGE Registry, s.v. “KwieKulik Archive”, by Piotr Szenajch, 2018. Accessed: October 07, 2018. (forthcoming)

lationship to the party. In Zagreb, Goran Trbuljak and Braco Dimitrijević, who were representatives of the New Art Practice (Nova Umjetnička Praksa), even managed to extend their praxis to an everyday public space: they held exhibitions in the lobby of a building in the city centre (Galerija Haustor). The conceptual and socially engaged art of New Art Practice, however, did not really fit into the socialist cultural policy, which tended to prefer initiatives like the Modernist (neo-constructivism, op and kinetic art) exhibition series *Nove Tendencije* (New Tendencies) in the MSU, which were thoroughly documented by a professional photographer, Tošo Dabac. In 1980, the Tošo Dabac Studio⁹ opened as a private gallery where Petar Dabac organized exhibitions. In Ljubljana, the IRWIN group as the art section of the Neue Slowenische Kunst movement, already reflected on the history of Avantgarde and neo-Avantgarde art in the 1980s. In 2001, IRWIN inaugurated the first comparative Eastern European online art archive (East Art Map). At the same time, Zdenka Badovinac, the director of the museum of modern art in Ljubljana (Moderna Galerija), founded the ArtEast2000+ Collection focusing on the contemporary and neo-Avantgarde art of the Eastern European region. In 2004, the Erste Stiftung established another important project, the online Kontakt Collection for the systematic archiving of Central, Eastern, and South Eastern European neo-Avantgarde art.

These Central and Eastern European public art archives and collections prompted significant Western European and North American museums to change their acquisitions policies. In 2009, MoMA founded its C-MAP (Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives) project, representing a new global perspective which includes a separate Central and Eastern European research group. In 2010, the *Promises of the Past* exhibition indicated a new Eastern European horizon in the collecting activity of Centre Pompidou as well. In 2012, the Tate Modern created its new Russian and Eastern European Acquisition Committee (REEAC) with influential collectors as its members who had also changed the focus of their private art collections in the second half of the 2000s to give more space to artists who represented neo-Avantgarde cultural opposition. One of the largest Eastern European “art archives,” the Zagreb-based Marinko Sudac Collection, also widened its circle of interest to cover the whole region from the Baltic States to the Balkans. Among the state financed museums of the region, the Slovak National Gallery (Slovenská Národná Galéria) in Bratislava and the Ludwig Museum Budapest also began to enrich their basically Modernist collections with neo-Avantgarde artworks. The newly (in 2005) established Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej in Warsaw based its identity in particular on the purchase of neo-Avantgarde artists’ archives and the documentation of cultural opposition. Beginning in the second half of the first decade of the new millennium, the Museum of Modern Art in Łódź

9 COURAGE Registry, s.v. “EXAT 51 and New Tendencies at the Tošo Dabac Archive”, by Lidija Bencetić, 2017. Accessed: October 07, 2018.

(Muzeum Sztuki) and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Wrocław (Muzeum Współczesne Wrocław, MWW) also put considerable emphasis on archiving the local neo-Avantgarde. Tranzit.org, which is one of the most outstanding examples of regional cooperative endeavors in the field of art (it has initiatives in Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and the Czech Republic) and is funded by the Erste Stiftung, is also pursuing research on neo-Avantgarde art and counterculture. The Hungarian tranzit.hu even launched an online database focusing on experimental and alternative exhibitions (*Parallel Chronologies: An Archive of East European Exhibitions*) in 2009.

Nevertheless, the mapping of cultural opposition is not the product of the 2000s neo-Avantgarde art-market boom. It started in the 1970s, and it stemmed from the neo-Avantgarde artists' practice, which was engaged in self-historicization and networking. Later, these processes became an important factor in the re-canonization and re-evaluation of the art of Eastern Europe, which at first appeared in national exhibitions in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc after the regime changes of 1989. The "new democracies" usually tried to prove that they had a cultural past (including Surrealism, Informel, Tachisme, post-painterly abstraction, Pop Art etc.) compatible with the West. Nevertheless, the new Avantgarde canon of the 1990s was formed parallel with the strengthened Western interest in Eastern European art. This interest, however, had a particular power relation which could be described by the notion of the "Western gaze." This "Western gaze" refers to the implied primacy of Western perspectives (phraseology and canon), which is always seeking and finding exotic versions of its own aesthetic values and artistic trends on the peripheries. The scholarly criticism of this "Western gaze," parallel with the Central and Eastern European reception of post-colonial theory, led to the issue of the deconstruction of the cold war Ostkunst—Westkunst dichotomy. The most important field of this deconstruction or revision was the large international exhibitions dealing with the art of the region in a comparative fashion. One of the first significant regional exhibitions, *Aspekte/Positionen* (MUMOK, Wien), was curated by Lóránd Hegyi, a Hungarian art historian who attempted to cast the former Eastern Bloc as a region which represented the specific modernist and neo-Avantgarde art of Austria, Hungary, Poland, the former Yugoslavia, and the former Czechoslovakia. At the same time, the Berlin-based Serbian art historian Bojana Pejić (with David Elliott, the director of Moderna Museet) organized another insightful comparative exhibition, the *After the Wall* in Stockholm. Pejić and another author of the exhibition catalogue, Piotr Piotrowski, who described the region as a "grey zone" between the East and the West, argued that the former East should liberate itself from the colonizing power of the Western gaze. A similar critique motivated the founder of the *Former West* research project (2008–16), Maria Hlavajova, director of BAK (basis voor actuele kunst) in Utrecht, who extended Igor Zabel's revisionist cultural perspective to imagine a post-totalitarian Europe in the age of the post-communist condition.

Similar intentions motivated Piotr Piotrowski to elaborate the program of Horizontal Art History, which sought to deconstruct the power/knowledge structure of the geopolitical centrum-periphery to accomplish a more sophisticated interpretation of Central and Eastern European art. Opposing the traditional, universal, vertical history of art, Piotrowski's theory focuses on the particular local histories of culture and the phenomena of adaptation and cultural translation aiming to falsify the older Modernist paradigm which describes the art of the Eastern Bloc as a mere replica or pastiche of the globalized Western canon. This new revisionist paradigm includes other theoretical perspectives as well to redefine the countercultural praxis of the neo-Avantgarde; Klara Kemp-Welch adapts György Konrád's notion of anti-politics to interpret neo-Avantgarde art as reticent cultural dissidence, and Claire Bishop uses the perspective of contemporary participatory art to reinterpret the oppositional stance of the neo-Avantgarde as a social praxis with both anti-communist and anti-capitalist intentions. As either a social praxis or a form of passive resistance, the neo-Avantgarde created its underground art with the intention of founding an alternative non-official canon based on networking and archive building which began to prosper in the 1980s parallel with the strengthening of political opposition in the region.

Contemporary Art between Institutionalism and Opposition: the Collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb

Culture as a Mirror of International Politics

The collection of post-war neo-Avantgarde art and conceptual and post-conceptual art of the 1970s and 1980s on the territory of the former Yugoslavia¹⁰ should be seen from the perspective of the specific political position that Yugoslavia had in relation to other Eastern European countries under Communist regimes and in relation to the West, not to mention from the perspective of the role of culture and art that was often utopian enough to allow the disruption of the original communist dogmas according to which the state policy sought to structure public life. Differences in state politics in other European communist countries and Yugoslavia were visible in social conditions and state politics from 1948. After the split with Stalin, the Yugoslav party leadership took another autonomous step, namely the introduction of "workers' self-management," an unknown form of production process management in the communist world. Beginning in the mid-1950s, the Yugoslav leadership opted for political and military neutrality, which was primarily reflected in its

¹⁰ The focus of the text, however, is on the situation in Croatia and Slovenia as former Yugoslav republics, although examples from Serbia will also be mentioned.

active participation in the Non-Aligned Movement. Josip Broz Tito, the president of Yugoslavia, highlighted the special position and role of Yugoslavia as a buffer zone in the Cold War between two differentiated, opposed political positions, the Communists led by the Soviet Union and the US-led liberal democracies.

This “oppositional” attitude could also be called “resistance” against the great forces, and it can also be recognized in the sphere of public life in general, where culture had a special place. There was a turn away from Socialist Realism, of which only traces remained by the early 1950s. This offered new opportunities, and cultural institutions turned to Western patterns. It is interesting that in these years the authorities established public institutions and organized cultural events that were generally in cultural opposition, seeking new models of action. The City Gallery of Contemporary Art (today’s Muzej Suvremene Umjetnosti, MSU) was established in Zagreb in 1954. From the outset, its mission was to establish a program policy based on the criteria and experiences of the pre-war historical Avantgarde, on opposition to ideologized culture and art (including post-war Socialist Realism), and on intensive internationalization and the opening up of space for the neo-Avantgarde experiment, which was a direct path to the idea of changing social realities. The Western experience and the specific geopolitical position of Yugoslavia were both used in this endeavor.

Abstract and Subversive Art in the Collections of MSU

An important role in the breakthrough of abstract art in Yugoslavia and its positioning on the international art scene was played by members of the Exat 51 group,¹¹ whose artistic work linked post-war Yugoslavia with the Western world. By presenting the extraordinary architecture and design of the Yugoslav pavilions at trade fairs in Europe and the United States and introducing geometric abstraction as a legitimate neo-Avantgarde visual vocabulary, whether in design, painting, or architecture, Exat 51 influenced a number of important events related to the exhibition and purchasing policy of Zagreb’s City Gallery of Contemporary Art and other existing museums and galleries, as well as those that would later be established. At the time, they changed their exhibition and collecting policy and shifted the focus from traditional Modernism to historical Avantgarde and neo-Avantgarde. Based on these premises, other museum institutions of contemporary art and international art events, such as the *Nove Tendencije*¹² (New Tendencies) in Zagreb (since

11 Here we emphasize the visual artists Ivan Picelj, Aleksandar Srnec, Vlado Kristl, and the architect Vjenceslav Richter. Other members of the group were architects Božidar Rašica, Bernardo Bernardi, Zvonimir Radić, Zdravko Bregovac, and Vladimir Zarahović.

12 *New Tendencies*, the international movement of new forms of art communication, which brought together artists of Op-Art, neo-Constructivism, Kinetics, Lumino Kinetics, and pro-

1961) and the *International Biennial of Graphic Arts* in Ljubljana (1955), were founded in the 1950s and 1960s.

In Belgrade and Skopje, museums of contemporary art were established in the 1960s, which in a certain way followed the established trend. In the early 1950s, the Gallery of Fine Arts (later the Modern Gallery, today the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art) in Rijeka changed its exhibition and collecting policy with a new focus on neo-Avantgarde, although the strong influence of the tradition of Modernism had been dominant for many years. However, in 1954, the exhibition *Salon '54* was held in Rijeka, at which the paintings of Ivan Picelj and Aleksandar Srnec, the artists of the Exat 51 neo-Avantgarde group, were exhibited for the first time. The aforementioned institutions, especially today's Museum of Contemporary Art, followed current events on the art scene. They organized exhibitions to collect contemporary art, which is how the Museum got post-war neo-Avantgarde and conceptual art works of the 1970s, and works by European artists were also collected in the same period.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the works of Ivan Picelj, Aleksandar Srnec, Vjenceslav Richter, and Vlado Kristl became part of the Museum collection. Kristl became a dissident artist, his experimental film *General* was banned by the censorship commission because of allusions to President Tito, which is why Kristl decided to stay permanently abroad. In these years, works by Julije Knifer, Josip Vaništa, Ivan Kožarić and Marijan Jevšovar, members of the Gorgona group, became part of the collection. The Gorgona protoconceptual group was established in Zagreb by Josip Vaništa and several artists and curators close to European and American phenomena, such as the groups Zero and Fluxus 1959. Over the course of the next few years, the groups' work was closely related to the activities of the City Gallery of Contemporary Art. The members of the group were Josip Vaništa, Julija Knifer, Ivan Kožarić, Đuro Seder, Marijan Jevšovar, Miljenko Horvat, and critics and curators Matko Matković, Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos, and Radoslav Putar. The members of Gorgona expressed their disagreements with the social realities of the time by avoiding them and retreating into the intimate space of a small community, thus opposing the trend of social collectivism. Because of this, their works are pervaded by spirituality and absurdity, quite the opposite of the rational geometric abstraction that was nurtured by Exat 51 members.

In the 1970s, the Museum purchased works by members of the Nova Umjetnička Praksa (New Art Practice) who were young artists who emerged in the period between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s in the larger cities of former Yugoslavia (Zagreb, Split, Ljubljana, Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Subotica). They shared an interest in media experimentation, primarily in recent television and video media, photography, but also in action and performance.

to-Cybernetics on five occasions, held at the Zagreb Gallery of Contemporary Art from 1961 to 1978.

They were interested in general civilizational issues concerning human rights and new topics, such as feminism and ecology. The phenomenon of media reality and the language of art were questioned. Nowadays, the Museum has a large and significant collection of these works of art and documentation purchased when the works themselves had only recently been made, and this makes the collection distinctive. The works of the Croatian protagonists Mladen Stilinović, Sanja Iveković, Gorke Žuvela, Vlado Martek, Dalibor Martinis, Josip Stošić, and others and Serbian artists Raša Todosijević and the members of the KOD Group, Bogdanka Poznanović, and others and of the Slovenian OHO group appeared in the collection in the 1970s and 1980s. A little later, works by members of the IRWIN group were also made part of the collection. The collection also received works by artists from Eastern Bloc countries, such as Dalibor Chatrný, Petr Štembera, Jerzy Treliński, Milan Knížák, and others, who then established contacts with our curators and artists.

Until the second half of the 1980s, regardless of the fact that artists were bluntly critical of social realities, the political system, and cultural policies and although they warned against restrictions on social liberties, for instance limitations on public and personal freedoms and the general lack of democracy, cultural institutions could still establish a public presence and they could also purchase the works of subversive artists. The public did not doubt the justifiability of these kinds of critical voices and it supported them, thus allowing art criticism to be institutionalized, so a space for artistic work and public reactions to it emerged. The art of the 1970s and 1980s in Yugoslavia emerged as a rejection of the major currents of canonized modernism, and artists adopted a radically critical attitude towards society and its undemocratic political arrangement, lifestyle, and dominant values in the visual arts, the so-called “fine art.”¹³ As Marijan Susovski argues, the purpose of this non-conformism was to develop art as “*an integral part of the criticism of the social praxis, in other words, a revolutionary mechanism for the introduction of qualitative changes to the social praxis.*”¹⁴

We are talking, of course, about limited conditions and boundaries that art and artists never crossed or crossed only very rarely. However, spaces of artistic freedom also suffered constraints in the West, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, but mainly due to economic pressures and generational and ideological disagreements. Artistic reactions were largely tolerated, but a radical and socially dangerous response emerged in the form of political terrorism, which seriously destabilized the public space in the West. States responded by suppressing various forms of resistance and opposition, thereby affecting the broader area of civil society and spaces of creative freedom. In the political West, radical art practices of the time recognized problems and pointed to

13 One thinks of Abstract Expressionism, Lyrical Abstraction, Surrealism and Figuration, and some forms of geometric art.

14 Susovski, *The New Art Practice in Yugoslavia 1966–1978*, 3.

specific social anomalies. The radical art practices in the West developed a discursive language that resembled the language of the Yugoslav conceptual and postconceptual art scene in the 1970s, the so-called Nova Umjetnička Praksa. The point of overlap is the understanding of art as a form of institutional and social criticism of political or cultural practices and thus as a promoter of change. At the time, the MSU collected works by Western artists such as Hans Haacke, Joseph Beuys, Denis Adams, Alain Fleischer, Antoni Muntadas, Ugo La Pietra, Julião Sarmiento, and others who had been critical, thematizing the system's unfairness toward the individual. The Croatian artist Marijan Molnar joined this artistic trend, and in 1981 he appeared on the cover of the newspaper *Studentski list* dressed as a terrorist. This subversive performance is documented in the Museum's ad hoc collection *Za demokratizaciju umjetnosti* (For the Democratization of Art).¹⁵

The similarities between these two systems find expression in public action and communication: the space of action is free until the political system feels threatened. For example, the arrest of the artist Tomislav Gotovac while he was performing the subversive *Zagreb, I Love You!* (when he walked completely naked in the centre of Zagreb in 1981)¹⁶ and the fine he received for this shows that the system did not distinguish between art and political ideology. Nevertheless, Gotovac was sentenced primarily for moral reasons, i.e. because he endangered public order and peace, not for "denying the system," which was the usual formulation for the activities of the regime's opponents.

Private Collections that Testify to the Culture of Disagreement

The anarchist movements of these years offered spaces for informal activities for those who were not visible but also worked on changing political opinions. In Yugoslavia in the 1970s, the members of these kinds of groups were members of the younger student population gathered around faculties of social sciences, artistic formal groups (Group of six artists¹⁷ in Zagreb), and the informal ones established by individuals like Vladimir Dodig Trokut or Zoran Senta, who were close to artist groups and became collectors. Trokut formed an extraordinary collection called *Antimuzej* (Antimuseum)¹⁸ based on a non-selective approach to the collection of ethnographic materials, art sub-

15 COURAGE Registry, s.v. "For the Democratization of Art Collection at the Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb", by Lidija Bencetić, 2017. Accessed: October 07, 2018.

16 COURAGE Registry, s.v. "Homage to Josip Broz Tito Collection at the Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb", by Lidija Bencetić, 2018. Accessed: October 07, 2018.

17 Here, in the sense of a preference for and affiliation with an anarchist worldview, the brothers Mladen and Sven Stilinović, Vlado Martek and Željko Jerman should be emphasized, while Fedor Vučemilović and Boris Demur, also members of the group, belonged to the politically moderate circle of artists.

18 COURAGE Registry, s.v. "No Art Collection", by Lidija Bencetić, 2017. Accessed: October 07, 2018.

jects, and cultural anthropology. As a publisher himself, on the other hand, Senta collected a unique library of anarchist rarities and artist's books. On the subject of collections it is interesting that the artists and protagonists of the Nova Umjetnička Praksa established the practice of exchanging works, so some artists have very valuable and significant collections, for example, Vlado Martek in Zagreb and Roman Uranek in Ljubljana. The Institute of Tomislav Gotovac systematizes the rich legacy of these artists and also owns a significant number of works by other artists which were collected by Gotovac.

However, the real boom in the collection of neo-Avantgarde, conceptual, and postconceptual art occurred after the political and social changes in the 1990s, when private collectors showed up and institutional interest in this kind of art began to grow. The EastArt2000+ Collection of the Modern Gallery in Ljubljana and the Marinko Sudac Collection in Zagreb, which were created in the past fifteen years, collect works of neo-Avantgarde, conceptual, and postconceptual art from the entire former East Bloc. Together with MSU, they constitute the most important collections of works by Eastern European artists. The EastArt2000+ Collection was created in 2000 within the Modern Gallery in Ljubljana, which today has about 11,000 works. The collection of Vladimir Macura in Novi Banovci near Novi Sad is also worth mentioning. In 2016, the Macura Museum opened here with a large collection of Yugoslav neo-Avantgarde art, which was collected from the 1980s. Their interest in Avantgarde, neo-Avantgarde, and conceptual art was built on existing theoretical and museum practices, but each of these collections, and especially the Marinko Sudac Collection, has turned out to be a remarkable contribution to the affirmation of this period in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the former Yugoslav republics of Slovenia, Serbia, and Croatia.

From Neo-Avantgarde to the Underground: Non-comformist Art in Poland

The climax of the activities of the underground art scene in Poland occurred in the middle of the 1980s in what has come to be referred to in the popular discourse as a consequence of communist repression. Actually, the artists who took the side of the "Solidarity" union proclaimed a boycott of the official structures after the introduction of martial law in 1981. Many of the underground galleries and art initiatives were a reaction to the decomposition of the map of the cultural institutions caused by martial law. However, the independent movement of "radical" and "progressive" artists, with its autonomous communicational network, private galleries, and niche events, had arisen in the 1970s, when the political situation was very different. It seems paradoxical if one takes into consideration the relative liberalization and welfare during the majority of the period of rule under first secretary Edward Gierek.

To understand the dynamics of the process that led artists to pursue their work informally in unofficial settings it is necessary to reconsider the relationship between artists and state politics as well as relations among artists themselves. After the Thaw in Poland in 1956, Socialist Realism was no longer the normative poetics in fine arts, and the state authorities overall withdrew from the direct control of the art scene. Moreover, after the decline of Stalinism, socialist cultural policy showed strong interest in Modernism, which previously had been denounced. In the visual arts, the triumphant return of apolitical Modernism occurred following the relatively short boom in Informalism as a manifestation of artistic freedom in the second half of the 1950s practiced e.g. by Tadeusz Kantor. Because of public appreciation for and promotion of modernist aesthetics, in the 1960s the Polish People's Republic acquired the image of a country of outstanding painters, sculptors, directors, and actors. In the 1960s, some pre-war Avantgarde artists, e.g. Henryk Berlewi, had brilliant careers, combining the visual attractiveness of their work with the status of pioneers and explorers. Berlewi, who since the late 1920s had lived in Paris, served in the official press as an example of the connections between Polish and Western modern art, but there were other artists in Poland who linked the pre-war and post-war Avantgarde tendencies. Henryk Stażewski was one of the most important figures among them. However, as Piotr Piotrowski put it in his book *Znaczenia modernizmu*, the esteemed pieces of the art of the time were much closer to Modernism than they were to Avantgarde, according to the distinction between the two drawn by Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

To examine the blurred division between Avantgarde and Modernism in post-war art in Poland, Piotrowski examined the attitudes of artists and critics associated with Warsaw's Foksal Gallery (which was established in 1966), including Wiesław Borowski, Henryk Stażewski, Tadeusz Kantor, and Andrzej Turowski. They were familiar with neo-constructivism but preferred to focus on a language of art (color, composition, and planes) than on the commitment to socio-political issues which characterized the Constructivists. The autonomy of art protected and conceptualized by the Foksal members was constructed against state control, so it was not just an escape into "pure" art. The attempt to save art from politics, however, resulted in aesthetic essentialism and concentration on the ontology of art or the existence of the author. The EL Gallery established in Elbląg in 1962 and especially the *1st Biennale of Spatial Forms* organized there by Gerard Kwiatkowski and Marian Bogusz in 1965 adopted a more Avantgarde approach. This event, in which 40 artists participated (including Zbigniew Dłubak, Zbigniew Gostomski, Kajetan Sosnowski, and Henryk Stażewski), was the first significant cooperative endeavor among artists inspired by Constructivism and industrial workers from the Zamech metal company. The artists wanted to collaborate with workers and contribute to improvements in the state of public spaces. The newly created geometric forms were placed on the streets of Elbląg, where they attracted the interest

of the citizenry. The message about collaboration between progressive artists and industrial workers was crucial if the artists were to have a better chance of gaining the approval of the authorities. Nonetheless, workers simply produced in a factory what artists requested, so the cooperation was unilateral. Thus, the ideological framework of Constructivism was set as an “umbrella” covering unrestricted formal research efforts rather than actually adopting the point of view of the so-called art workers.

For the next several years, EL Gallery became an exceptional art laboratory for artists who were searching for a connection with the public and who saw themselves as having a role in reshaping the social realities. The fifth and last edition of the Biennale known as Kinolaboratorium (Cinematlaboratory) in 1973 was a great presentation of works by young artists which contested patterns of perception and relationships between artists and society, with essential shows by the Workshop of Film Form, which was founded in 1970 in Łódź. In spite of the success of the event, Kwiatkowski, the head of EL Gallery, migrated to Germany in 1974 and the institution lost its Avantgarde reputation. Nonetheless, it had already encouraged young artists to pursue art engaged in social issues alongside formal experiments. At the moment, the EL Gallery manages a collection of works from these events and takes on many other initiatives, from sound art workshops to the reprints of the famous “Art Worker’s Notebook” (“Notatnik Robotnika Sztuki”), with the aim of continuing Kwiatkowski’s interdisciplinary, multimedia, and innovative legacy. However, Kwiatkowski’s attitude toward work and labor has not yet been thoroughly examined or problematized. Unlike the neo-Avantgarde artists from Warsaw, Łódź, and Wrocław, who used industrial metaphors to discuss art, Kwiatkowski in fact worked physically shoulder to shoulder with Elbląg’s workers and had not been recognized as a professional artist.

Events such as Elbląg’s Biennale, Symposium Puławy ‘66, Symposium Wrocław ‘70, International Meetings of Artists, Scientists and Art Theorists in Osieki, and many similar occasions were essential presentations of conceptual art and thought in Poland. But the “scientific” approach, which focused on questions of technology and formal problems of art, turned out to be boring and repetitive for young artists, e.g. members of the Film Form Workshop. They sought to challenge the vision of art represented by the great conceptual artists: harmless to the state apparatus and alienated from social life. Of course, Conceptualism had a critical impact as well; Włodzimierz Borowski and other Polish Conceptualists aimed to deconstruct the aesthetic ideologies and the modern mythologies of art and the figure of the artist as genius and creator. In his renowned essay “Art in the Postartistic Times” (“Sztuka w epoce postartystycznej”), the theoretician and critic Jerzy Ludwiński even announced that in the future art would become equal to reality, close to science and technology while far from traditional objects and exhibitions. Although works by Ludwiński, Borowski, and Kantor were milestones, they were still focused on the language and autonomy of art, e.g. the question of representa-

tion. In the 1970s, some conceptual artists and theoreticians reached the positions of the consecrated Avantgarde in the field of cultural production (in terms used by Pierre Bourdieu in his *Rules of Art*). They were endorsed by curators and journalists and their galleries (such as Foksal in Warsaw, Mona Liza in Wrocław, odNOWA in Poznań, and Krzysztofory in Krakow) were relatively free of government control.

In contrast, artists like Paweł Freisler, Marek Konieczny, Henryk Gajewski, Natalia Lach-Lachowicz, Zofia Kulik, Przemysław, Paweł Kwiek, Józef Robakowski, and his friends grouped in the Workshop of Film Form wanted to be engaged in social and political matters, observe social habits, and reform the petrified social and institutional structures. At the same time, they were interested in the new media and fascinated by the social, scientific, and artistic potentials of technological progress, but in more pragmatic way than their older colleagues who represented Conceptualism. They were “deserters of Conceptualism,” as Konieczny called himself, positive nihilists, to use the phrase coined by Andrzej Partum (older than but artistically close to the neo-Avantgarde circles), or the “phony” Avantgarde, which is how Wiesław Borowski spitefully described them. Their dissent was more against the art schools, museums, regional galleries, and other institutions of culture, with their tinsel ceremonies, intellectual meaninglessness, and coteries, than it was against the official socialist ideology or authority. As Łukasz Ronduda claimed in *Polish Art of the '70s*, the neo-Avantgarde’s attitudes toward the state regime were more reformist and pragmatic than openly rebellious. In the beginning of the 1970s, Zofia Kulik, Przemysław Kwiek, and Zygmunt Piotrowski were strongly convinced Marxists, and they created a Polish version of soc-art (“new socrealism,” as Piotrowski called it) and persuaded the ruling Party to give them opportunities to develop their audio-visual shows on a mass scale (their attempts were unsuccessful, though, due to criticism of Avantgarde forms of their propaganda art). Konieczny envisioned enriching of the drab and colorless world of everyday life with the usage of artistic imaginary. The purpose of the provocations and intrigues set out by Freisler was to mock the Foksal Gallery milieu by taking the ideas of conceptualism to an absurd extreme and openly questioning the position of an artist in socialist society. The bravery of the feminist art by Lach-Lachowicz (although contemporary feminist critiques call into question the adequacy of this label in the case of Natalia L-L works, she herself is commonly seen as a pioneer of feminism in visual art in Poland) is beyond doubt, but compositions like her *Consumption Art* from 1972 were a powerful attack on the masculine domination (or phallogocentrism, to use the term coined by Jacques Derrida), commodification, and mass consumption, i.e. an attack on the dominant conservative culture, not the Party’s principles. Even political performances conducted in the Repassage gallery by Elżbieta and Emil Cieślár were closer, due to their metaphorical form, to philosophical reflection on the history of the nation than to the straight critique of the state socialism regime.

On the basis of these generational and ideological shifts, the independent art movement was formed in the 1970s. Participants in the movement had realized that there was no space for their activities in the official art institutions, so they had gradually dropped out of galleries and artists' associations and established their own sites in private flats, attics, and student clubs. The Bureau of Poetry, Remont, Repassage, Sigma, Dziekanka, and Mospan in Warsaw, the Exchange Gallery, A4 Gallery, the Address Gallery, and the Na Piętrze Gallery in Łódź, the Newest Art Gallery and the PERMAFO Gallery in Wrocław, and Akumulatory 2 and Wielka 19 in Poznań are only a few examples of them from the four main cities where the neo-Avantgarde emerged in the 1970s. The function of the new sites located in private properties or properties managed by student associations and in a few cases sites without regular addresses was from the beginning to document the meetings, performances, happenings, film shows, and exhibitions, archiving this documentation and reusing it in subsequent undertakings. The pressure to gather could be plainly seen in the Exchange Gallery activities ran by Józef Robakowski, originally together with Małgorzata Potocka. Robakowski, a member of groups Zero-61, Krag, and Workshop of Film Form, knew better than anyone else that new art needed to invent its traditions. He had begun gathering his private collection in the 1960s, when he found out that there were opportunities to buy relatively cheap works by pre-war formist painters at flea markets, as well as some curiosities and ethnographic artefacts. He also documented the work of his groups and colleagues. Finally, he participated in the informal network of an exchange of works of art among artists. The habit of exchange art items as gifts became the underlying idea of the Exchange Gallery, which was established in 1978.

The Exchange Gallery was a site for exhibitions, discussions, video art projections, film shows, and lectures. These events were documented, as were many others outside the gallery. From many colleagues, Robakowski received video cassettes, tapes, leaflets, art books, mail art pieces, and photographs. This led to the emergence of an impressive archive. At the same time, in his own artworks and theoretical texts Robakowski claimed that the progressive neo-Avantgarde represented by him was the legitimate heir to the heritage of the pre-war great Avantgarde of Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro, Karol Hiller, Stefan Themerson, Jalu Kurek, and the Jewish group Jung Idysz. Robakowski referred to their works in his own art and autobiographical compositions. Other neo-Avantgarde artists made similar efforts to display their politically and aesthetically progressive attitudes, which ran contrary to the "academic" and traditional art that was prized by public institutions and influential people in the Polish art world.

After the boycott of the public sites under martial law had been announced by the artists associated with the "Solidarity" union, the "patriotic," conservative wing of the art scene found new opportunities to hold exhibitions in the museums and galleries owned by the Catholic Church. That was

true in the case e.g. of the painters from the Krakow group Wprost, like Leszek Sobocki and Zbysław Grzywacz, who created figurative pictures combining the Polish art traditions of Sarmatism and Romanticism with Surrealist imagination and nationalistic, conservative messages. For most of the “progressive” artists, this was not acceptable. In the very critical moment they found their allies in punk and new wave bands and among the subsequent generation of rebellious poets, performers, and photographers. In Łódź, they created the Chip-in Culture (Kultura Zrzuty), which was an informal network of provocative, radical artists, theoreticians, and critics. In Wrocław, the group Luxus, which combined claims by Joseph Beuys with a neo-Dadaist sense of humor and the poetics of neo-Expressionism and Pop Art, had strong bonds with the underground music scene and shared a joyful, anarchistic, and “carnavalesque” attitude with the Orange Alternative movement. In Warsaw, Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek, known as KwieKulik, continued to pursue uncompromising, critical investigations of the social norms of behavior and frames of perception in their private flat. As Piotr Krajewski wrote in *The Hidden Decade*, it was extremely important that the artistic underground was engrossed in the new media and genres, such as video art, performance, happening, and mail art. Video shows and performances rarely required professional art spaces, and the mail art circuit sustained the transnational community of underground artists beyond the official scene.

The commercialization of art in Poland during the time of the capitalist transition brought to an end the opportunities for the underground. The hardships of the early 1990s pushed artists to produce art that would be attractive to Western collectors (there was no market for art in Poland) or to take jobs outside the art scene. The relatively independent spaces of underground culture now had commercial value, and without support from city hall, in most cases they were replaced by businesses. The commodification of art resulted in the decline of the Modernist myth of bohemia, which was still cultivated in the art underground of the 1980s. Nonetheless, the legacy of the radical, progressive art, from the Avantgarde of the 1960s to the neo-Dadaism and neo-expressionism of the 1980s, was a crucial foundation for art institutions and critical discourses. Some collections are still in the private possession of their creators and collectors; this is true in the case of Robakowski’s Exchange Gallery collection, the Museum of the Orange Alternative¹⁹ organized by Waldemar Fydrych, historic leader of the movement, and the private collection owned by Barbara and Andrzej Bonarski, influential promoters of Polish young art in the 1980s. For the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, the archives of artists associated with the Foksal Gallery, the neo-Avantgarde from the 1970s, and the neo-Expressionists became the foundation for the image and identity of the Museum. The Wrocław Contemporary Museum chose

19 COURAGE Registry, s.v. “Museum of the Orange Alternative”, by Xawery Stanczyk, 2017. Accessed: October 07, 2018.

a similar approach to the construction of its image: the institution holds the entire archive of Ludwiński, as well as many items created by the Luxus collective and other underground artists. Also, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź is well known for gathering the Avantgarde art (both pre-war and post-war), with a special focus on local neo-Avantgarde and progressive movements represented by Robakowski, the Workshop of Film Form, and Chip-in Culture. The legacy of the radical Avantgarde and underground art is used as objectified cultural capital by both institutional and personal actors, who collect, present, classify, and dispose of it, depending on their own goals within a constellation of positions and position-takings, as Bourdieu would say.

Passion, Profit and Informing in the GDR: Portrait of a Successful Collector of Formalist Art in a Socialist Country

The last case in this chapter involves a gallery owner and collector who can be called a successful deviant, someone who found the appropriate way of being deviant in a socialist society and of wedding cultural opposition to lucrative collaboration with the socialist authorities. We will examine his trajectory principally thanks to the Stasi files (*Staatssicherheit*). He was indeed an informer for the secret police, and his nickname for the Stasi was “Kunath.”

When we want to write the history of a collector on the basis of secret police files, we are confronted with a historiographical imbalance. On the one hand, we have a lot of works about the state police forces and their connections to broader society in the socialist states; we also have reflective works about the use of these files by scholars. This situation largely stems from the facts that, due to the different lustration laws which have been passed since 1990, secret police files are seen as particularly meaningful and are considered as a politically sensitive issue. They are supposed to reveal who was and who was not guilty of collaboration. This situation is also shaped by the fact that these archives are wonderful materials for historians, who find in them an array of information (not only about repression). On the other hand, we have very few works about collecting practices under socialist regimes.²⁰ This suggests that collecting was marginal at the time, and the socialist framework prevented it. State socialism would have signed the collector’s death sentence. This idea is questionable, because it ignores two facts. There were original forms of buying art and therefore also possibly new forms of collecting. Previous habits of collecting survived from the capitalist time to the socialist one, as the curious case of Kunath demonstrates.

20 One exception from the GDR is Kaiser, “Treibjagd im Kulturschutzgebiet.”

A Complex Profile: Artist, Merchant, Manager, Collector

Kunath lived in the East German town of Dresden, and he was active from the beginning of the period of socialism in East Germany to the end. Thus, he experienced the different phases of its artistic life: the specific climate during the period of Soviet occupation from 1945 to 1949, when interest in modern art was re-established after the Nazi period, the Stalinist period after 1949, during which there were anti-formalistic campaigns, the Stalinized destalinization of the late 1950s and 1960s, and the precarious liberalization under Honecker.

Kunath was not an art collector first and foremost. He was initially an artist, and as such he belonged to the artists' union. He was also at the head of the private gallery created by his father. Finally, he worked for one of the "co-operatives for selling" (*Verkaufsgenossenschaften*), which were created after the uprising of June 17, 1953 in East Germany. The authorities wanted to thank the artists for having remained silent during the revolts, so they offered them opportunities to manage cooperatives, where works of art could be sold and bought. They were autonomous institutions,²¹ and they were supposed to be ruled by artists, but in reality the difference between artists and merchants could be blurry. Some artists, like Kunath, created few works of art and preferred serving as merchants and managers.

A Deviant Career

Despite his membership in the artists' union and his involvement in the cooperative, Kunath could have been a target for socialist repression. Many factors could have prompted the authorities to define him as an enemy of the socialist state. He came from a bourgeois milieu, his father having been a rich art dealer in Dresden. According to his biography, which was written by Stasi officers,²² he was "very active in the Hitler Youth" during the Third Reich and had been a member of the liberal party (LDPD) since the Soviet occupation (but he did not participate in the June 17 uprising, and he did not protest during the events in Poland and Hungary in 1956). Moreover, he had contacts with the West German art world, and he created, collected, bought, and sold formalist paintings.

21 The cooperatives benefited from the support of the Ministry of Culture, but they were free to organize as they liked. The Minister of Culture stepped in sometimes, for instance by reproaching them for having very high prices and not making works affordable for everyone, but this was just a symbolic remonstrance. Bundesarchiv (BArch) DR1 n°8075, Ministerium für Kultur an Verkaufsgenossenschaft Dresden (October 15, 1958).

22 The following information comes from the documents that the Stasi officers collected in 1963. Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR (BstU), Dresden Archivierter IM Vorgang 6316/90, Vorschlag zur Werbung eines GI (March 23, 1963).

More importantly, he participated in the main Dresdner salon, led by Ursula Baring. Baring was a collector who created her collection under the Third Reich by preserving the legacy of Ernst Barlach and by buying so-called degenerate art from a store in Güstrow. After the war, her salon was an important site for the bourgeois Dresdner milieu of the 1950s. There, guests could not only discuss modern Western art (Pollock, Soulages, Hartung, Bazaine, the group Cobra, and the first documenta in Kassel),²³ they could also buy works of art which were on display in her apartment. For instance, Wilhelm Müller, an artist who was not a member of the artists' union and who worked with informal abstraction and afterwards with concrete art, exhibited and sold pieces of art in Baring's salon.²⁴ The salon was watched by the Stasi officers, who forced Ursula Baring to stop holding her salons in 1963.²⁵

Thus, Kunath was a regular participant in Baring's salon. On Sundays, he himself held a similar but smaller and more irregular salon, "with discussions about decadent art," according to a report submitted by another Stasi informer.²⁶ His fondness for "impressionism, expressionism and abstraction" was apparently common knowledge, and his own rare creations proved it. Descriptions of him by the Stasi officers and by informers show how irritating his mannerisms could be to them. "He looks like an artist from the West. He has very short hair and a thin beard. Also a turtleneck sweater. He makes a good impression. He seems to be calm and sure and to believe everything he says."²⁷ An informer writes about him: "he conducts his business in a very bourgeois way and that is very much appreciated in the cooperative [...]. He is very good in business; he is obsequious and knows all the technics of management."²⁸ Files from the secret police are full of such remarks about behaviors and habitus, based on social resentment and observation. Officers and informers not only gave information, they also objectified what they saw, and it is no wonder that historians today use these archives more and more frequently to write the history of attitudes and perceptions in the socialist contexts.

Uneven Collaboration

But the Stasi did not launch a "repressive action" against him, as it did against Ursula Baring. Instead, the officers approached him and encouraged him to become an informer. "With him, we have the possibility to keep under surveillance a large number of people and to reach people in whom we

23 *Zur Geschichte der Sammlung Ursula Baring*, Kupferstichkabinett Dresden, 1997.

24 Sächsisches Landes- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden (SLUB), Nachlass Wilhelm Müller, Mscr.Dresd.App.2810.

25 BStU, Dresden XII 95/62, Operativ Vorgang « Aussteller » (1963).

26 BStU, Dresden Archivierter IM Vorgang 6316/90, Abschrift von gez. "Sarink" (November 24, 1962).

27 *Ibid.*, 1.Kontaktgespräch (February 07, 1963)

28 *Ibid.*, Abschrift von gez. Wendeborn (May 24, 1963)

have a special interest."²⁹ He accepted, saying he would cooperate "if it's really certain that no one will ever hear about this collaboration."³⁰ He became an IM in 1963.

The reports from his discussions with Stasi officers reveal a great deal about the circulation of Formalist art (which was then more and more tolerated, at least for its Impressionistic and Expressionist tendencies) and the activities of merchants and collectors. They make clear that official trade fairs (especially the *Frühjahrmesse* and *Herbstmesse* in Leipzig) were opportunities for merchants to buy and sell works of art. For instance, Kunath noted that one sculpture fetched 275 East German marks in Dresden and sold 530 marks in Leipzig a few weeks later. Such practices were illegal, because they represented undeclared income and ran contrary to the socialist condemnation of speculation, but the cooperative of Dresden did the same thing in a legal frame.

The officers were unsatisfied and often had the impression that they were being fooled. Kunath was reluctant to give compromising information. About one merchant whom the officers wanted to watch, Kunath said that "he played no negative role," which was obviously a way of protecting the man in question and which reminds us that collaborators with the secret police not only denounced but also protected people. The merchants that Kunath informed on were his competitors, and he used collaboration with the Stasi to eliminate them. Stasi officers were not duped: "when he came to speak about X, suddenly he gave a lot of details, because he sees in X a rival."³¹ More generally, the officers were annoyed by the way he controlled information: "during every discussion about these questions [political matters], he never says openly what he has in mind. In the last conversations with him, we observed that he always beats about the bush to give the right political impression."³²

Profit

After several years, the Stasi agents considered collaboration with Kunath useless and met less and less frequently with him. He remained an IM, but in the late 1970s the officers regretted that "his disposition to unofficial work is limited."³³ Collaboration was a constant negotiation and power struggle, in favor of the informant in this case. Nevertheless, in the 1970s and 1980s, in the context of a growing demand for art and a relative proliferation of galleries (ruled by city councils, regional authorities, or local artists' unions), Kunath still led a successful business. We have very few sources on his private gallery,

29 BstU, Dresden Archivierter IM Vorgang 6316/90, Vorschlag zur Werbung eines GI (March 23, 1963).

30 Ibid., 1.Kontaktgespräch (February 07, 1963)

31 Ibid., Zweite Aussprache (February 25, 1963)

32 Ibid., Vorschlag zur Werbung eines GI (March 23, 1963).

33 Ibid., Jahresbeurteilung (October 18, 1979)

but we have some sources on the Dresdner cooperative,³⁴ and in 1975, its revenue was considerable: 1,286,023 Ostmarks. One key to his success was the way in which he played with the borders between the authorized and unauthorized worlds. According to the rules of the cooperative in 1975, the board included a woman who was a party member and whose explicit mission was to maintain a good relationship between the cooperative and the party.³⁵

The case of Kunath is interesting in many ways. First, it reminds us how complex social profiles and trajectories could be in socialist contexts: the same person could have several professional activities and be involved in different worlds belonging to the official and the unofficial spheres. Second, the image of a socialist society paralyzed by mutual espionage and fear is misleading. Mutual surveillance was a reality, but it did not produce paralysis. Kunath was successful in connecting his surveillance work with his other activities. Surveillance and repression were elements of his business strategies. Third, there is no reason to think that modern art was incompatible with dictatorship. We know several examples when socialist powers used modern art for their own purposes (in Yugoslavia after 1948, in Poland after 1956, in Romania in the first year of the Ceausescu regime from 1965 to 1971, before the “July Thesis”); and this case shows that, in certain circumstances, an individual could manage to promote modern art continuously from the rise of the dictatorship to its fall.

Should we consider Kunath an exceptional case? Obviously, yes: few collectors were as successful as he was, and few led different institutions like he did. But the different files about him show that he shared a lot with the world of collectors. And let us note that a case like that of Jürgen Schweinebraden and his EP Galerie (which is generally preferred by scholars because it gives a pure version of cultural opposition concluded by immigration) was in many ways exceptional. Most of the collectors of formalist art (whose names we come across in the Stasi archives or in the archives of the cooperatives) were certainly somewhere between these two types, and we have certainly a lot to discover about these occasional collectors and buyers.

The case of Kunath also teaches us that we should be cautious when we try to connect considerations about collecting and considerations about cultural opposition. Collecting as such did not imply cultural opposition. It had a lot of different meanings, and it was part of other social logics, not just the project of protest against the social order.

Finally, it puts at the center of the analysis the issue of passion. Despite their irritation, the officers acknowledged Kunath’s true “inner passion” for art: “he does his job as painter and as collector with passion.”³⁶ This collector

34 Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin (AAdK), Verband Bildender Künstler Zentralvorstand n°5306, Genossenschaft bildender Künstler «Kunst der Zeit» Dresden Rechenschaftsbericht über das Geschäftsjahr 1975 (November 12, 1976).

35 Ibid.

36 BstU, Dresden Archivierter IM Vorgang 6316/90, Vorschlag zur Werbung eines GI (23.03.1963).

made his passion for formalist and decadent art compatible with the dictatorship. The case invites us to reconsider the passion for art, which is essential in the history of collecting, in its relationship with profit and repressiveness.

Conclusion

In the period of the Stalinist Cultural Revolution, Modernist (mainly Abstract and Surrealist) art was considered a form of cultural opposition in most of the countries (except Yugoslavia) of the Eastern Bloc. After 1953, during de-Stalinization, the ideology of socialist Modernism recuperated a significant part of Modernist art, but any political or social critique of the system was strictly forbidden. Beginning in the 1960s, neo-Avantgarde art (Fluxus, Happening, Conceptual art, Action art) criticizing the autonomous ideology of Modernism became the core of cultural opposition in the visual arts. These neo-Avantgarde artistic efforts were organically interwoven with a renewal of modern music, theatre, and film. The alternative, neo-Avantgarde art scene was also associated with youth subcultures (Hippie, Punk, New Wave), and in some culturally liberal countries, it became an integral although strictly controlled (secret services, agents) part of the public sphere. In the Soviet Union, the GDR, Bulgaria, and Romania strict political control actually hindered the evolution of a significant "second" alternative, non-official art life. Official state museums could collect works which were examples of this type of culture only in Yugoslavia and Poland. In the other countries of the Eastern Bloc, expressions of cultural opposition were only archived by private collectors, mostly artists and art historians. After the regime changes in 1989, there was a surge in the processes of canonization of cultural opposition, which is clearly visible in the acquisition policies of the regional and global art institutions and private collections in the twenty-first century.

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