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Art History and Geo-Politics in an (Un-)Divided Europe

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Géo-esthétique, Paris : B42 ; Pougues-les-eaux : Parc Saint-Léger ; Clermont-Ferrand : Ecole supérieure d'art de Clermont Métropole, 2014. Sous la dir. de Kantuta Quirós et Aliocha Imhoff

Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art: Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956-1989*, Londres : I.B. Tauris, 2014

Pavlina Morganová, *Czech Action Art: Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art, and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, Prague : Charles University in Prague, 2014

The Desire for Freedom: Art in Europe since 1945 = Verführung Freiheit: Kunst in Europa seit 1945, Berlin: German Historical Museum, 2013. Sous la dir. de Monika Flacke et Henry Meyric Hughes

Potrzeba wolności : sztuka europejska po 1945 roku = The Desire for Freedom: Art in Europe since 1945, Cracovie : MOC AK, 2013. Sous la dir. de Delfina Jalowik, Monika Koziol

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The Desire for Freedom. Dossier: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo : Umjetnička galerija Bosne i Hercegovine, 2014

- 1 *The Desire for Freedom: Art in Europe Since 1945*, an ambitious project organized as the thirtieth edition of the Council for Europe's exhibition series, takes the novel approach of trying to fight European integration via neo-liberalism with an equally integrationist Enlightenment model of freedom posed as "critique." Beginning at the German Historical Museum in Berlin in 2012, the core project included one hundred and eighty works produced in the post-war and contemporary periods from forty member countries of the

Council of Europe. It has since travelled and been re-imagined in five cities across this expanded Europe.

- 2 The stated goal of the exhibition project as a whole (drawn from historian Reinhart Koselleck's thesis on the dual historical process of critique and crisis ushered in by the Enlightenment) is to connect the two blocs of Europe partitioned by the Cold War. To do so, the exhibition brings together models of artistic vanguardism that are radically discontinuous both geographically and politically. What connects the dizzying array of included works is their common interest in putting "across [their] own particular endorsement of democratic and artistic freedom."¹ Because of the exhibition's organization around various sub-themes relating to freedom and its repression, "artistic freedom" (the ability of art to maintain its *formal* freedom) is often divorced from the specific contexts of its emergence, and thus made to stand for a universal value of abstract critique. The formerly peripheral Central and Eastern Europe has now become subsumed into an undifferentiated and un-hierarchical cartography. Despite the complications raised by Koselleck's theories, posing this un-hierarchy around an integrated Europe obscures the ongoing tensions within the region. This geo-political frame, in addition to the exhibition's underlying telos of Enlightenment freedom, merely serves to expand the borders of the center relative to the traditional global periphery.
- 3 *The Desire for Freedom's* secondary venues served to productively nuance the relationships between freedom, artistic practice, and geo-political identity. At the Museum of Contemporary Art in Kraków, Poland, only video works were displayed and there was a greater focus on artists from outside Western Europe. This narrower mediumistic but broader regional focus was matched by a more coherent definition of "freedom" as the battle against (covert) enslavement (arguably stemming from the lived experiences under totalitarianism in the region, but which could be extended to post-transition tensions). Borrowing the broad thematic idea of *The Desire for Freedom*, the National Art Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo staged an independent version of the exhibition focused on six artists from that country to consider the manifestation (or suppression) of freedom through the question of art and ethno-national ideologies. The Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki similarly maintained *The Desire for Freedom's* temporal, regional, and thematic core, but limited its version of the exhibition to pan-European artworks held in Greek collections. This practical limitation provides a rich structure through which to unpack the networks of exchange between the Greek artworld and the cosmopolitan centers of Europe. Whether in longer texts, interviews with participants in the Greek art scene, or in shorter entries throughout the catalogue that chart the actual movement of individuals and artworks across European borders, a complex picture is painted of the entwined geo-political and aesthetic dynamics at play that both encourage and impede artistic exchange and freedom. The core project of *The Desire for Freedom* is thus not unaware of the specificities and inequalities between European regions, or more precisely between the Former East and Former West; it merely aims to sublate these geo-political binaries.
- 4 This diverges from the dominant model of the center and periphery as it has been engaged in histories of Central and Eastern European art. Art produced behind the Iron Curtain has played a central role in the decentering and globalizing impulses that have characterized the practice of art history in the past twenty years. Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski has noted the unique historiographic challenges of Central and Eastern European art by characterizing its originating region as art historical subject's "close

other”: “on the margins of European culture, outside the center but still within the same cultural frame of reference”.² This ambiguous position, in which the formal terms of Central and Eastern European art are legible in the West while its political ones are not, has resulted in histories that focus first and foremost on the (belated) aesthetic influence of the West on the East. This reinforced the scholarly frame that relegated Eastern culture to the aesthetic periphery, to match the Western center’s view of Soviet politics during the Cold War. Against this construction, Piotrowski proposed the highly influential model of “horizontal art history,” which reorients the analytic frame from the universal to the particular, and accordingly from the West to the East, by considering the multiplicity of art historical, and more importantly *geo-political*, points of view underlying artistic scenes. Instead of attempting to bypass the geographic and political divisions of the Cold War, a horizontal art history must critically take account of the mutual inflections of these terms, “transform[ing] such a position into an analytic advantage, a tool that will allow us to reveal the meaning and the dynamic of a place in its entire, complex identity.”

³ Within this formulation, both center and periphery, Former West and Former East, should be interrogated for their geo-political specificities rather than assume an unmarked center.

- 5 The status of geo-politics, as both an object and frame for art historical analysis, presents a methodological problem with which recent histories of art from Central and Eastern Europe, as well as recent publications dealing with the questions of artistic regionalism more broadly, continue to grapple. As it did for Czech readers when it was originally published in 1999, the recent translation of Pavlína Morganová’s *Czech Action Art: Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art from Behind the Iron Curtain* (2014) provides English-speaking audiences with the first sustained academic overview of unofficial and non-conformist Czech artistic practices from the 1960s to 1989. Morganová’s rigorous research (drawn from interviews with artists, visits to personal archives, and in-depth analysis of untranslated Czech art scholarship), extensive inclusion of rare photographic documentation, and the book’s timeline of key events and figures are valuable source materials in their own right. Furthermore, *Czech Action Art* aggressively draws out the socio-political and formal-cultural contexts of these primary materials, ultimately coming to systematically define Czech action art as a constellation of artistic practices distinct from its Western parallels of Body art, Happenings and Events, and Land art, by dint of its condition of being “held hostage by politics”.⁴ In her first chapter, Morganová undertakes a short but instructive comparison between Allan Kaprow’s “Happenings” and Milan Knížák’s actions that gestures to the underlying methodological stakes of her geo-politically- and regionally-specific approach to art produced behind the Iron Curtain. Knížák has been written into the history of Happenings and Fluxus as “the director of Fluxus East,” with Kaprow himself including the Czech artist in his anthology *Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings* (1966). Such inclusions, based on typological linkages, have served to over-determine Knížák’s rather ambivalent connection to these international movements. While Morganová charts these international relationships of Knížák and others (when present), she situates these connections as one of *many* localized dynamics specific to the Czech Republic from which Czech Action Art emerged. More important for Morganová, for instance, is the primacy of socio-political conditions under Communism that have impacted the lives of these artists, and thus the form their experiments in art/life took.

- 6 In *Antipolitics in Central European Art: Reticence as Dissidence Under Post-Totalitarian Rule*, Klara Kemp-Welch similarly analyses a strain of art produced behind the Iron Curtain within the specific geo-political structures of its emergence. Kemp-Welch examines six artists (Tadeusz Kantor, Július Koller, Tamás Szentjóby, Endre Tót, Jiří Kovanda, and Jerzy Bereś), working between 1956 and 1989 in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, and all engaged in action-based practices. Beyond their situation behind the Iron Curtain, what further ties these nationally and historically disparate figures together, she argues, is a reticence towards politics manifested in a formal retreat (for instance, Kantor's journeys into absurd theater, or Koller's flight from the present moment, and even terrestrial space, through his projects focused on UFO's). Kemp-Welch undertakes an intellectual history of dissident thought in Central Europe, drawing out the key ideas that connect writers such as Václav Havel, Jacek Kuroń, and György Konrád, to claim that, far from apolitical, the skepticism of these artists towards politics proper presents an artistic counterpart to the regionally-specific strategy of "antipolitics." While this concept was variously articulated at different historical moments and locations within the region, "antipolitics" is, fundamentally, a political engagement illegible within existing structures of power; or a "politics outside of politics".⁵ Kemp-Welch's use of "antipolitics" to frame both artistic and (extra-) political strategies allows her to mutually inflect the oppositional viability of each within *formal* terms. This move provides a necessary restructuring of the binary of apolitical and political, official and unofficial that has often been used to characterize art from behind the Iron Curtain in the absence of a western-style, capitalist art market.
- 7 The circumscribed geo-political frames (both in terms of scope and in terms of methodological focus) of *Czech Action Art* and *Antipolitics in Central European Art* provide rich and necessary insights into the specificities of an artistic history that has long been obscured and marginalized. In the contemporary moment, however, the geo-politics of this artistic region are shifting. As demonstrated by an exhibition such as *The Desire for Freedom*, art produced behind the Iron Curtain, and across it, can now be subsumed into the Western historical narratives of modernism, progress, and now neo-liberalism. In projects outside Europe that are attempting to write transnational histories of global art, Central and Eastern European art has become a key regional spoke in a global wheel.⁶ Such transnational readings (as Piotrowski almost prescriptively suggests) can be productive in establishing horizontal frames for art history.⁷ However, Joaquín Barriandos has cautioned against the danger of the "new internationalism." He claims that the decentralization of global art through the inclusion of the periphery (or what he calls "geo-esthetic regions") has not resulted in a critical reappraisal of global power dynamics but has only resulted in an entrenchment of Western hegemony.⁸ While Barriandos' assessment is rooted in post-colonial critique, and thus a much different kind of "othering," it is suggestive of the geo-political conditions of the global artworld in which Central and Eastern European art now circulates.
- 8 Drawing its title from Barriandos' concept, *Géo-esthétique* is a French-language anthology of original and newly translated texts from the past twenty years which have contributed to the geographical thinking stimulating both contemporary artistic practice, as well as its theorization. Overseen by Kantuta Quirós and Aliocha Imhoff (members of the curatorial platform *le peuple qui manque*), the anthology brings together a broad array of theoretical approaches that engage critical cartography, post-colonial critique, queer theory, Marxist geographies of labor, and geographic art historiography (including

Piotrowski's canonical text) in order to question the current spatial constructions of the (art)world. For instance, in « *Fabrica Mundi : Dessiner des frontières et produire le monde* », Sandra Mezzadra and Brett Neilson analyze the concept of the border beyond its state definition. Through a close reading of Marx, they focus on the structural connection between colonialism and capitalism that manifests itself in the current establishment of borders based on divisions of labor and financial circuits. As a whole, *Géo-esthétique* thus provides many necessary reminders (for Central and Eastern European art history as well as global art history) of the ongoing need to unpack not only the operations of state ideology that marked the Cold War period, but of the multiple vectors through which space is organized under global capitalism, where any regional artistic practice, in the words of Barriendos, risks becoming a geo-esthetic asset.⁹

NOTES

1. Flacke, Monika. "The Journey", *The Desire for Freedom: Art in Europe since 1945 = Verführung Freiheit: Kunst in Europa seit 1945*, Berlin: German Historical Museum, p. 17
2. Piotrowski, Piotr. « Du tournant spatial ou une histoire horizontale de l'art », *Géo-esthétique*, Paris : B42, p. 126
3. Piotrowski, Piotr. *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*, London: Reaktion Books, p. 20
4. Morganová, Pavlína. *Czech Action Art: Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art, and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, Prague : Charles University in Prague, p. 30
5. Havel, Václav. "An Anatomy of Reticence", *Václav Havel. Living in Truth*, London: Faber and Faber, 1989, p. 193. Quoted in Kemp-Welch, Klara. *Antipolitics in Central European Art. Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956-1989*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2014, p. 8
6. For instance, the Museum of Modern Art in New York's C-MAP Global Research project, that establishes Central and Eastern Europe as a regional category (alongside Latin America and East Asia); or *ArtMargins*, an online-turned-print journal, which has recently expanded its focus from Central and Eastern Europe to global interactions in art.
7. Piotrowski, Piotr. « Du tournant spatial ou une histoire horizontale de l'art », *Op. cit.*, p. 126
8. Barriendos, Joaquin. "Geo-aesthetic Hierarchies: Geography, Geopolitics, Global Art, and Coloniality", *Art and Globalization*, University Park: Penn State Press, 2010, pp. 245-250
9. Barriendos, Joaquin. "Geo-aesthetic Hierarchies: Geography, Geopolitics, Global Art, and Coloniality", *Op. cit.*, p. 245-250