

Forgács, Éva. Piotrowski, Piotr. *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*. Translated by Anna Brzyski. London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2009. Pp. 498, 233 halftones. AHEA: E-journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 5 (2012): <http://ahea.net/e-journal/volume-5-2012>

Piotrowski, Piotr. *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*.<sup>1</sup> Translated by Anna Brzyski. London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2009. Pp. 498, 233 halftones.

Éva Forgács, Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, CA

*In the Shadow of Yalta. Art and Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989* is the long-awaited English translation of Piotr Piotrowski's 2004 book *Awangarda w cieniu Jalty* published in Poznań, Poland. The title is unusually brilliant, because not only is it clear about what the book discusses, it also entails the particular definition of the Eastern Europe that the author chose to cover: the area falling under Soviet rule following the agreement of the victors of World War II.

After an Introduction that surveys the previous scholarship of this field resulting in exhibitions, books, and conferences on the art of what Piotrowski alternately refers to as the "Eastern Bloc", the "Soviet Sphere", "Soviet-Occupied Europe", or simply the "Grey Zone of Europe" throughout the book, sometimes switching for "East-Central Europe" or just "Central Europe", he starts his story in 1948-49, when Stalinism fastened its grip on Eastern Europe, and squelched with the stroke of a pen, all ongoing cultural developments and debates.

The issue of the 'geography of Eastern Europe', taken up in the Introduction returns in the closing chapter of the book and is one of the theoretical undercurrents of the book that I will discuss in more detail below. Signs of the difficulty of molding a clean-cut definition of Eastern Europe show at the very beginning though. Pure geography does not work quite accurately, as the political realities did not square with it – the former Yugoslavia, geographically part of the region, was not part of the Warsaw Pact, but a Non-Aligned country in an Organization with India and Egypt rather than the Soviet Union during most of the period under discussion. However, Piotrowski correctly senses that in many respects Yugoslavia was historically, culturally and in terms of many political rituals part of the region, so he includes it while he totally excludes Austria that had been in the Soviet zone until 1955, and had strong and lasting historical-cultural ties to the former territories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Exclusion of Austrian art is particularly felt when Viennese Actionism is left unmentioned in the chapter dedicated to Body Art.

The book is organized more or less chronologically while the various contemporaneous tendencies are sorted out in different thematic sub-chapters. The 3-year transition period 1945-1948 is described as "The Surrealist Interregnum" constituting the first part of the book, and is followed by the second major unit: "Modernism and Totalitarianism", taking the reader up to 1968 through chapters on the Informel, geometric abstraction, "Un-Socialist Realism", and the emergence of mixed media and conceptual works at the expense of the classical medium of the oil painting. Part three, "The Neo-Avant-Garde and 'Real Socialism' in the 1970s" surveys the conceptual tendencies, art movements, and outstanding artists of the decade walking the reader through the major artistic centers of the region, without dogmatically insisting on the exact time frame. Political dissent and the rich varieties of artistic responses to oppression are in focus. The last unit is the Epilogue, where the author discusses some developments of the ever more international art world of the post-communist era.

Telling a comprehensive narrative of the visual arts in post-World War II Eastern Europe is a gigantic challenge that makes Piotrowski's undertaking nothing short of heroic. Countries with different histories, languages, and cultural traditions were thrown into the same historical and political cauldron after 1945 and there is no evidence of any artist or cultural agent having a regional, "East European" consciousness anywhere from the GDR to Bulgaria. Given that, as I have argued elsewhere, the term "East European art" does not originate from Eastern Europe<sup>2</sup>, Piotrowski's attempt at creating a chapter of regional art history is all the more respectable.

<sup>1</sup> This paper first appeared in *Art Margins*, [www.artmargins.com](http://www.artmargins.com)

<sup>2</sup> For this argument, see Éva Forgács, "How the New Left Invented East-European Art", *Centropa*, volume 3, No. 2, May 2003, pp. 93-104

The heterogeneity of the region and the variety of the developments and life stories bring about logistical dilemmas. Do artists who had lived in Eastern Europe but immigrated into a Western country count as East Europeans? Or only for the segment of their career that unfolded, or was still heavily determined, by the country of their origin? To what extent does A. R. Penck, singled out by six reproductions from among Georg Baselitz, Sigmar Polke, and Gerhard Richter, belong to the art of the GDR? How Polish was the work of Alina Szapocznikow, who was trained in Prague, and chose to live and work in Paris; how Hungarian was the work of Endre Tót, who lived abroad for longer periods of time, and how Yugoslav was even the pre-1989 career of the international artist Marina Abramović? These questions arise because of the political struggle that the artists had to fight throughout most of the period of the four decades covered by the book, and those who were, even temporarily, not under the same pressure and threats as their colleagues at home, were more exposed to different cultures and did not share quite the same experience. That is an important factor only because, as Piotrowski also underlines, one of the most crucial experiences within Eastern Europe was the array of restrictions and limitations in self-expression, showing art publicly, and traveling to other parts of the world.

A book like this inevitably causes disagreement among its readers regarding who and what is included and excluded. Piotrowski is one of the best informed scholars in this field; still, his choices are not always balanced. It remains to be seen if there is any scholar with penetrating, completely even-handed information about the artistic production of each of the East European countries. In any case, it is noticeable that Polish art is discussed in the greatest of details, Hungarian and East German art get a lot of attention, and accounts on Yugoslavian art are less detailed except for the Epilogue, while only smaller fragments of the Romanian developments and hardly anything out of Bulgaria are discussed. This might reflect the actual reality on the ground; but does not deliver on the promise of the title.

A regrettable lacuna is the textile art of the 1960s and 1970s across the board. Since textiles had not been regarded as a representative grand art by the officialdom, they had received less attention from censorship and by the turn of the 1960s and 70s textile art had become one of the most inventive, innovative, and radical mediums in most East European countries. This was greatly helped by the worldwide development of textile art and the international exposure of that field by frequent biennials, triennials, workshops, and solo exhibitions, and this international interest had integrated the textile art of Eastern Europe into the fabric of Western art like no other kind of art in the region at that time. It was in the medium of textile that the careers of artists like the Polish Magdalena Abakanowicz, the Romanian Ana Lupas, the Hungarians Margit Szilvitzky, Zsuzsa Szenes, and many others who had gradually turned into sculptors or painters were launched.

While Piotrowski structured his book very sensibly so that he could reveal the theoretical and political undercurrents that he identified in East European art, I take issue with certain distortions and perspectives in the discussion of Hungarian art. For example, he adopts the concept of a Hungarian art historian that there existed a “Hungarian Pop Art” parallel to the English and American trend. In fact, there is no consensus about the correctness of this concept among Hungarian art historians; but regardless of this, the claim that Pop Art existed in a society that had not known consumerism and had had neither a consumption-driven popular culture nor an art market, in the absence of which no criticism or love-and-hate relationship to these could develop there, might have warned the author to be more critical to that claim. “Hungarian Pop Art” referenced such international icons as Marilyn Monroe or Joseph Beuys rather than local household names that had not been found worthwhile, or the artists of the neo-avant-garde referenced each other (as Sándor Altorjay thematized Miklós Erdély, duly mentioned by Piotrowski), reflecting on their isolation from the rest of the culture. How could such an open, all-inclusive, trivia-loving, and market-thrilled trend as Pop Art have developed in an oppressed, closed, and poor country? How could remote allusions to some Western icons and methods be understood as a full-fledged local version of that trend? I sorely missed mention of some of the central figures of the 1960s and 70s Hungarian art like the painters Ilona Keserü, László Méhes, and the sculptor István Haraszty, while Endre Tót, certainly interesting but not a central figure of the period, comes across as the most important hero.

It is correct to put the fine arts into the broader context of the visual arts of course, but if the great theater work of the Polish painter and theater artist Tadeusz Kantor is discussed in detail, the Hungarian alternative theater groups led by Péter Halász and István Bálint, László Najmányi and Tamás Fodor respectively, each of which played key roles in the Budapest neo-avant-garde in the late 1960s and early 1970s, deserve mention, too. The same goes for mentioning the Łódź Workshop of Film, and not mentioning the Béla Balázs Studio where, beside the outstanding cinematic achievements, many Hungarian artists, including Tamás Szentjóby, Dóra Maurer, Miklós Erdély, Ágnes Háy, and Péter Donát had an opportunity to make experimental films. Instead of listing all my discontents at this point, I bring up just two more items: on p. 125 the facts regarding the relationship of the avant-garde journal “Ma” and the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic are not correct (Kassák did not „disapprove” of the Communist regime, in point of fact he worked for it not only as editor and publisher, but also as a censor of street posters, even if he had a public debate with the Commune’s leader), and I can only hope that the phrase “the populist ideology of Béla Bartók” on p. 126 is a typo.

Piotrowski’s book is dense with information, and only while reading it does it dawn on the reader that the post-World War II history of East European art can simply not be squeezed into one volume. So after all one nods in agreement with the fact that it is but one possible selection of art events and art works. However, while Piotrowski identifies the artists and art groups of Eastern Europe, there is confusion in his use of the term ‘neo-avant-garde’ in the Eastern context, that is increased by its frequent consideration as synonymous with ‘post-modern’ (for example on p. 286).

Given the mountain of literature and sharp debates on this issue, it is safe to state that use of the term ‘neo-avant-garde’ differs in Western and Eastern contexts. In the West, the neo-avant-garde was the product of a paradoxical development, namely “that the story of art within the new politics of the 1960s [was] one of considerable ambivalence as artists attempted to reconcile their stance of opposition with increasing support for their activities in a new and aggressive global marketplace (...) and the ambivalent fascination felt by audiences for the work of dissident artists”, as Thomas Crow describes it<sup>3</sup>. The post-World War II generation accused the classic avant-garde of institutionalization and selling out, giving up its critical position for the power and status warranted by the museums and the market. The neo-avant-garde was critical of this position as well as of actual institutional power. In Eastern Europe, by contrast, the historical avant-garde’s positions did not change. As Hungarian art historian Géza Perneczky explained, in the absence of money, success, and institutional acclaim, the avant-garde remained in opposition with its symbolism remaining unfailingly relevant<sup>4</sup>. The new generation of the 1960s had the same spirit of revolt and faith in art’s redemptive power as the classic avant-garde while testing the political frontiers in the 1960s and 70s.

Throughout the book, but particularly in the Epilogue, Piotrowski makes the point that globalization and the World Wide Web are an alibi for the power of the West that in fact colonizes the rest of the world. He suggests that the firm de facto presence of other regions, for example Eastern Europe with its full geographic reality, might at least reveal the truth about this state of affairs: “Since the virtualization of space is becoming an instrument of the center’s dominance, the introduction of a geographic dimension deprives the center of its theoretical alibi and reveals the center-based character of globalization and multiculturalism.” (p. 420) While this point is often voiced in critical theory and in writings about Eastern Europe, it is also to be considered that East European art historians including Piotrowski had consistently narrated the history of classic modernism in Eastern Europe in the terms of Western developments – Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, and so on. Now the second, post World War II part of that narrative, also in this book, seems to adopt the same method, using the terms neo-avant-garde, pop art, gender, the body, the critique of consumerism, intertextuality, colonization, and globalization, seeing the culture of Eastern Europe through the critical, self-critical, and theoretical roster of the West. For better or worse, driven by a desire to be understood or aiming at integration, the discourse on

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties*, New York: Abrams, 1996, pp. 12-13

<sup>4</sup> Géza Perneczky, “A fekete négyzettől a pszeudo kockáig. Kísérlet a kelet-európai avant-garde tipológiájának megalapozására” (From the black square to the pseudo cube. An attempt to laying the groundwork for a typology of East European art) *Magyar Műhely*, Vol. 16, No. 56/57, Dec. 1978, pp. 27-45

Forgács, Éva. Piotrowski, Piotr. *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989*. Translated by Anna Brzyski. London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2009. Pp. 498, 233 halftones. AHEA: E-journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 5 (2012): <http://ahea.net/e-journal/volume-5-2012>

East European art has been adjusted to the ongoing mainstream discourse on Western art. Until a distinct East European set of ideas and terms emerges, this strategy affirms that the art and culture of Eastern Europe has been symbiotic with that of the West throughout the entire cultural history of the West. It is the NSK, the group *Neue Slowenische Kunst in Ljubljana* discussed in the Epilogue by Piotrowski that has come to the chilling realization of having to use strong language, that of the totalitarian symbols, to drive home a point about the East European experience. It is not a subtle language, but it is clear.

There was nothing the West as Center could have done culturally to help the political and economic reality. A glaring example was an episode I witnessed during the 1987 exhibition *Expressive: Central European Art since 1960* in Vienna, a show that Piotrowski mentions. The well-meaning Austrian hosts organized a meeting with the participating Central European artists and art critics. The term was new then, and was pronounced gingerly as a proof of recognition, instead of the more condescending ‘Eastern European’. Neat and tidy in three piece suits and seated behind a long table covered by a well ironed cloth, they encouraged the artists to come up with requests: what kind of help could they use best? What could the hosts do for them? Grants, fellowships, organizational issues? Climate control in exhibition rooms? A solo show, anyone? After a long silence the Polish artist Jerzy Bereś, unshaven, coarse, wearing a stained polo and somewhat under the influence, stood up and started to talk in Polish. “Give him a mike – where is a mike? Pass it to him!” But Bereś, once he started, was not interested in the mike. Then a translator was needed, who finally gave sense to Bereś’s loud and angry monologue to those behind the table: “The Russians”, he shouted and gesticulated. “Get the Russians out of here!” Political freedom was not among the offerings of the hosts, and the well-intentioned meeting came to an abrupt and hopeless end. Truth spelled scandal. The abyss between the East, even if called “Central”, and the West was unbridgeable. Which was just one demonstration of the power of not so much the West, as the facts. Good will can go a long way, but not all the way.

The book as a printed object, although equipped with a beautiful cover - begs for better treatment. The reader does not see much evidence of copy-editing; publishers underestimate the significance of how misprints can undermine the authority of a book. There was a time when copy editors had a hawk’s eye for slips like “Centrum Pompidou” (14), “Charter 77” instead of the Czech “Charta ‘77” COBRA instead of CoBrA (78, 80, etc.), missing or misplaced articles and prepositions and misspelled names. The names of cities, to mention just one item out of many, are not consistently used in English – Prague, not Praha, stands for the Czech capital, but Kraków, instead of Cracow, or Krakow for the Polish town, and Genf instead of Geneva. The captions of the illustrations don’t identify the techniques, materials, and dimensions of the artworks.

It might have been a good idea to include a chronology as a back matter to the book, listing the important events, groups, and movements in the region during the communist decades, along with the names and life span of the most important artists. While reading the book it is easy to lose track with such fleetingly mentioned groups as the Polish St-53, 4F+R, and R-55 or the Czech Křižovatka, Umelecká Besada, Synteza, or the Club of Concretists.

All things considered, Piotrowski’s book is a major contribution to the scholarship on Eastern Europe and a treasure trove of facts, organized and sorted out in a way that has not been done before. It is a groundwork that many later publications will build on.