



The present time of the conceptual art

The Political Implications of Eastern European Art

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As "conceptual art" we regard *per definitionem* those artistic tendencies that deal with ideas or concepts. Two traditional schools of conceptual art is the one based on the work of Henry Flint, who proposes that concepts constitute the raw material of art and, secondly, the more "strict" and linguistic-based school of Joseph Kosuth, according to whom the task of the artist is to change the concept of art, which he or she can only achieve through the medium of concepts. In comparison, Eastern-European conceptual art is relatively simpler and involves more irony and humor. However, given that it is charged with political references, it must be added that the movement as a whole cannot be severed from the political function it assumes.

Conceptual art emerged in a plurality of genres, forms and local variations. Among the numerous manifestations of the movement that extended the strictest/traditional definition of conceptualism was the German „*Konzept*," the simple verbal or pictorial/visual representation of a concept that is also typical to Eastern-Europe. Other related movements are the (Italian) *arte povera*, or the frequently utopian *project art*, *land art* or *earth art*. It is therefore evident that a work of art is not conceptual because it is exclusively constituted of concepts or words, but because the concept is of primary importance/essential to the structure of the work, as in the example of *minimal art*. In this sense of the term, *geometric*

abstraction and *concrete poetry* are also in close kinship with conceptual art even though we tend to separate it from (literature,) poetry and the novel. The majority of *environment art*, *body art*, and *object art* of the 1960's and 70's was conceptual, and in this sense we can mention *conceptual painting* as well. Mail art also presents a singular genre of conceptual art, as does the affiliated *artist stamps* and *rubber stamps*.

Perhaps the most significant attribute of conceptual art is its self-reflective or medial character. The conceptual art work turns in on itself and, in the manner of a tautology, bodies forth its own self-examination and criticism. It is by way of such preoccupations that conceptual art develops an interest in different technical media and communicatory tools. On the one hand, it makes use of photography, film, video, etc., and on the other, it questions the quintessential character of these very technical media, photography, film, and video (television), as it does the photocopy, the telephone and the telefax. Moreover, it is open to media (and genres) both old and new: books (book objects, „artists books“), sounds and music, theater, architecture, dance, and to a surprising degree in Eastern Europe, textile objects. Naturally there is no shortage of interdisciplinary or intermedia combinations.

We will be looking for the distinctive features of the Eastern-European, Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American variety of conceptual art as well as the different political meanings of the movement.

Eastern-Europe as Art Geography or Geopolitical Concept?

The “Eastern-Europe” we speak of is an undeniably political concept that is best understood within the terms of current postcolonial discourse. Eastern-European conceptualism as a whole therefore

unequivocally carries a political charge. (Its constant shift in meaning, such as has taken place over the past two-hundred years is a different matter.) Particularly as a result of these circumstances, the more politically neutral, or if anything, "euroconformist" term "Central-Europe" constitutes the current nomenclature, succeeding the slightly unnecessarily technical "East-Central Europe." Countries of this region such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Romania and the southern states of former Yugoslavia, each having maintained different ties with Hungary and served under the century-long governance of the Turks or the Hapsburgs only gained with independence as nations or nation-states in the modern sense during the nineteenth-century. Close after the revolutionary upheavals of the 1840s, Hungary attempted to unyoke itself of Hapsburgian authority, also triggering the Croats' attempt to disentangle themselves from the Hungarians. These undertakings were thwarted by the "compromise" reached by way of the creation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1867, which established a union of states that survived only until the First World War. The map of Europe drawn around 1920 and only partially redrafted in the Second World War bore the brunt of national conflicts. A paradox emerges regarding the period in question: if Europe and the therein included Austro-Hungarian Empire had not collapsed in 1919-20, it would have undoubtedly in 1989/90, as did the balance between the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. Eastern-European art did not remain insensitive to the problems of nationalism and national identity (in Hungary at the time), as can be observed in the avantgard's anticipation of the regime change of 1989/90 in an artistic vocabulary that conflated the goals of "internationalism," with those closer to home. (It is a different matter that these

avantguard tendencies received warranted postcommunist or postmodern criticism after the regime change.)

Eastern-Europe in the 1960's and 70's comprised entirely of "socialist" states that had come under the authority of Soviet Union by way of the Warsaw Pact, officially known as the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. Avantguard and particularly conceptual art experienced a strong reaction to the ideological, social and political contradictions of these times. The establishment of (Soviet) dictatorship in varying degrees—especially rigorous in Hungary after the defeat of the 1956 revolution, Czechoslovakia's invasion in 1968 and the rule of „martial law“ in Poland in 1981, then weakening in 1968 with Prague Spring and over the 80's with "weak dictatorship," "humane socialism" and the times of "Hungary the lager's most cheerful barrack"--sharpened the contradictions between the Leftist convictions of the East and West, particularly after the West's official policy to reach out to the East in the 1960's.

According to this geography, Eastern-Europe was made up of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, the German Democratic Republic and the body presiding over these states, the Soviet Union. In reality, however, the GDR did not belong to the Eastern bloc in its entirety and only the western segment of the Soviet Union, if any at all, was considered a cultural part of Europe, (so much the more the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania).

Since the 1970's, there have been an increasing number of plans to turn the politically false atmosphere and conflict-ridden conditions of coexistence into an opportunity

for collaboration, but these have not always been successful. Bi- and trilateral relationships deserve all the more attention, and we should reconstruct them

as soon as possible. In 1980, my colleague Gabor Pataki and I collectively published a utopian manifesto entitled "Eastern-European Questionnaire," in which we attempted to extend *ad absurdum* the limits of socialist world construct as imagined by art. In the end, Albania also conceived of a communist social infrastructure for itself, only distinct from the Soviet Union and rather allied with Maoist China and other communist countries of Far-East Asia such as North Korea and North Vietnam. We then turned toward Latin-America's most significant communist countries, the anti-American Cuba and Allende's Chile, Angola aided by Cuban soldiers in Africa, the Federation of Arab Republics in North Africa and Palestine in the Middle East, depending on which of the last two the Soviet Union chose to ally itself with. Independent of, or even in opposition with the Soviet Union, Israel also had be given consideration, given its strong ties with Eastern Europe. In the end, we reached the quasi dadaist or pataphysical conclusion that Eastern Europe extended across the entire globe. These deliberations were and continue to be aided by the comparison between the case of Eastern-European emigrants, diasporas, nomads, the relationships between different nations and the postmodern principle of "center and periphery" on the one hand, and the "dissidents" of 1956, the immigrant workers of Yugoslavia, Chilean refugees, Eastern-European Roma, Romanian Saxons or the emigrated Jews on the other. One typical postmodern experiment was the global passport created in 1992 by the NSK group (*Neue Slowenische Kunst*) of Ljubljana. The First Global State of the Universe, the State of NSK has been established.

Art and Politics

It cannot be unequivocally claimed that either the entirety or any specific national variety of Eastern-European conceptualism constitutes an art of political protest. It was suspect in the eyes of communist authorities as the movement refused to follow the doctrine of socialist realism and because it affiliated itself with "Western models." Not all forms of conceptual art were overtly political, (as many relied on implicit references). However, beyond the fact that conceptual art's use of references can itself be considered a typical feature, we can still find a number of explicitly political works of conceptual art. The latter are closely related to the forms of *protest art* in the West from around 1968.

The majority of Eastern-European states between 1960 and 1980 were governed by a dictatorship set in place by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The form of government was a "People's Republic," or a "Socialist Republic," meaning that the government was not only the sole legal party, but that it was also the executive agent of the Soviet communist party. Certain socialist states governed in military or economic collaboration with the Soviet Union. Culture and art were informed by the fundamental principles of the Party, themselves validated by cultural ministries and their executive bodies. The doctrine accorded greatest weight but not rigorously enforced in Hungary was the "Three T's" (*t•rni, tiltani, támogatni*, or "to tolerate, to prohibit, to support"), which was coined by György Aczél, the second man after János Kádár in the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. According to the principles of the "Three T's," socialist art had to be supported, while all seditious, anti-Soviet, subversive and publicly offensive work prohibited until the majority of art belonged to the category of work that was "tolerated." This did not mean much more privilege than that the "tolerated artist" could exhibit in the capital's only small gallery, which he

was obliged to rent rather expensively. The doctrine of the "Three T's" was never carried out in practice consequently, but was taken advantage of enormously for purposes of autocracy and self-gain. It is also true, however, that graver punitive measures and police intervention were relatively rare. (We now know that the III/III. department of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, responsible for "cultural defense" worked with an extensive network of informers and used undercover methods to regularly report on avantguard artists.) Although no authoritative body officially bore the responsibility of censorship, the Publishing Directorate had to authorize every literary publication. In the realm of the fine arts, a board administrated by the Cultural Ministry's Lectorate for the Fine and Applied Arts, a branch of the Fund for the Arts of the Hungarian People's Republic decided on whether to pass each publication, public work of art and exhibition. Every nation developed its own set of taboos which ensured the suppression of criticism regarding the socialist regime and party, the Soviet Union (particularly the presence of occupying forces), communist leaders, and the current economic situation. In Hungary, it was forbidden to refer to the uprising of 1956 as a "revolution." If someone found fault with the Treaty of Trianon by which Hungary lost two-thirds of its lands, they were perceived as irrendentistic and chauvinist and as having offended the interests of other socialist states. Although it was not legally forbidden, positive mention of Western art and lifestyles was not recommended, religious practice was considered a form of "idealism," the "Jewish question" was practically taboo and, obviously, all mention of freedom of speech was unadvised.

Although I will hold off on comparing the artistic and political establishments of different nations, their freedom of speech and the severity of their censorship, I will mention a few important conditions

of conceptual art. Unlike Hungary, Poland officially censored its works of fine art, but in an entirely more relaxed manner. Similarly, even after the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the intellectual and artistic climate of Prague and Pozsony was more liberal than in Hungary. Hungary seemed the glowing land of artistic freedom to East-Germans, whereas East-Berliners had a significantly more intense relationship with West-Berlin than any other states. Enormous differences can be detected in relations with the Soviet Union and the cult of personality between Tito's once-partisan Yugoslavia (where there was no Soviet invasion and the organs of governance were to be made examples of), Ceaucescu's Romania (which separated off from Soviet control), and Kadar Janos' Hungary, where he had initiated puritan economic reforms (a mechanism suspended by Moscow in 1973) or even between the cultural politics of Stalin's, Khrushchev's and Brezhnev's rule.

The boundaries and framework of the political and "political-cultural" infrastructure laid the grounds on and against which conceptual artists sowed their themes and reaped their communicational strategies. As travel was particularly limited (in the 1960's tourist-passports were only issued once every three years), posted mail became the obvious choice for a means of international communication, a phenomenon largely accountable for the participation of artists in international graphics biennales, as mailed art provided perfect opportunity to bypass home juries. The *samizdat* (meaning "self-publishing") represents a specifically Eastern-European genre, of Russian origins, which was responsible for the illegal reproduction and dissemination of books, journals, and frequently artwork. In publishing the Hungarian *Szétfolyóirat* (cca „diffusing magazin”), every issue was put together by a new editor who revised half of the previous issue, so that the identity of the

contributors would be kept anonymous. The anonymous artists of the so-called *Inconnu-group* borrowed their name from the services of the post as well: since undeliverable mail was marked with an „*inconnue*“ or “unknown” label and returned to sender, the *Inconnu* artists sent their post to non-existent addresses that would then be “returned” to their intended destinations.

The same *Inconnu* group was responsible for the „kopjafa“s, wooden memorial columns, carved with folkloristic motifs planted in the once-secret graves of the martyrs of the 1956 revolution, among which was the prime minister Imre Nagy. They explained that these activities would be the last of their political statements as such free times did not call for active protest.

Art and Society

From a strictly sociological point of view, politics represents the means of acquiring power, putting it to practice and state governance. In a democracy, it constitutes the arena of either agreement or discord between parliamentary parties. More generally, *polis* signifies concern with social affairs. Therefore, we can consider a demonstrated sensitivity to and thematization of social matters in a work of art to be a form of politics, not solely social criticism or protest. The question of a public becomes relevant at this point in our discussion. Different audiences can be established in Eastern-European art with the question of a public in mind. Although even the radical avant-garde possessed a legal and publicly accessible front, there existed a subcultural, underground fraction whose main voice was the *samizdat*. Only a fraction of this underground culture was artistic in practice (including the hippy movement, rock music and the full gamme of street

theater), the rest consisted of a purely political group that maintained contact with western student movements and the New Left. Increasingly wide-spread happenings and the Fluxus movements starting in 1965-66 should be mentioned here, arguing for the importance of the everyday, the commingling of life and art, the claim that "everything is art" and the "everyone is an artist" and calling for the deposition of high art. (Milan Knizak in Czechoslovakia, Tamás Szentjóby, Miklós Erdély, Gábor Altorjay, Endre Tót, Gábor Tóth in Hungary, György Ligeti, the expatriate Hungarian, Vitautas Landsbergis in Lithuania, the Roman Daniel Spoerri etc.). Around 1968-1970, more intellectual, political, social and aesthetic endeavors met in concerted protests: the Knizak and Aktual group found voice in the 1968 protests in Prague; modeled on the peace protests during the Vietnam war, protesters in front of the US Embassy in Budapest were classified as threatening to order and were only released from prison after a hunger strike; Tamás Szentjóby and the ("chapel exhibitors") of Balatonboglár staged solidarity strikes for Czech and Slovak avant-garde artists after Czechoslovakia's invasion in 1968.

Two especially typical Eastern-European subjects are *double entendre* games on communist emblems and references to internationalism and provincialism. As examples of the former, the Serbian-Hungarian member of the Bosch+Bosch group of region Novi Sad, Bálint Szombathy demonstrated in Budapest with a Lenin portrait attached to a board in 1972, and somewhat earlier, Dora Maurer staged a one-woman protest on the 1st of May by marching up and down her room on a piece of paper. The picture of János Kádár innocently exhibited alongside a portrait of the artist's wife signified a serious provocation to authorities even though the title given to the work by the artist Miklós Erdély's was no more than: "Two individuals who

radically altered my life." Sándor Pinczehelyi's self-portrait holding the hammer and sickle (1973)—intended as an ironic gesture—continues to live on in popular imagination to this day, whereas he and the Pécs Studio group were not afraid to use these and similar images for purposes of communist propaganda. Appropriation of the Workers' Movement's iconic images—social realist requirements—was the most common activity of the conceptual avant-guard artist. Gábor Attalai created an enormous, five-branch star out of the snow on bank sides of the Danube in Budapest. A few years later, György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay built a living tableau of Vera Muhina's famous "Labourer and Kolkhoz Woman." Prague's Knizak worked with Lenin quotes with his mouth "tied shut" by a red band painted over his mouth. A few icons, or, more precisely their contexts underwent a metamorphosis over time. In 1968, the Cuban-Bolivian Che Guevara was treated as the idol of both the Left in the West and the avant-guard in the East. However, up to this day, it is forbidden in Hungary to wear clothing with printed portraits of the revolutionary, as the totalitarian implications of the red star adorning his hat bans it by law from public use. Recently, Venice's walls bore a reduced, stencil (pochoir) version of Pinczehelyi's emblematic portrait.

Not only did Pinczehelyi exploit Communist emblems for purposes of irony, he also worked with Hungarian national symbols, for example by combining the three-colored flag with the Coca-Cola logo and thereby introducing another play with opposites. He gave a comic spin to the confrontation between East-West, socialism-capitalism, internationalism-provincialism in a similar vein to Tamás Szentjóby's *Coca-Cola with Vodka* adverts, the Polish Jerzy Beres 's folkloristic and archaic actions, and the Slovakian Vlado Popovic or the Hungarian Imre Bukta's agricultural campaigns and objects. Gyula Gazdag's film, *Sípoló macskak*•

("Hissing Cat Stone") pairs May of 1968 in Paris with March 15th in Budapest as then the official celebration of the 1848-49 war of independence waged against the Hapsburgs with an anti-Communist dictatorship protest. Ruthlessly caricaturing his own Jewish origins in a few works, the Hungarian János Major elevates the contradictions between international and Hungarian conceptual art to tragi-comic poetry. His writings are not other than annotations to the shrine of a certain Lajos Kubista ("Cubist Lajos").

1. Cubist Lajos was interred at the cemetery of Farkasret in Budapest
2. Cubism was born in Budapest
3. No ism was born in Budapest
4. Victor Vasarely was born in Hungary
5. Op Art was not born in Hungary
6. Nicolas Schöffer was born in Kalocsa
7. Kinetic art was not born in Kalocsa
8. Tivadar Herzl was born in Budapest
9. Cionism was not born in Budapest
10. The father of the nuclear bomb, Leó Szilárd was born in Hungary, died in the USA
11. Pop art was born in the USA, its influence extended to Hungary
12. Béla Bartók was born in Hungary, died in New York
13. Concept art was born in New York; since not one concept has been born in Budapest
14. János Neumann, outstanding mathematician and the inventor of the computer was born in Hungary and died in the United States
15. Cybernetics has been used for the successful production of artwork in numerous technologically developed nations, whereas in Hungary—as far as I know—we have never gotten around to it

If, as I claimed, all arguments of the above

concept are incontrovertible facts, then in this case "fact art" would be a more fitting title than "concept art."

Would Fact art have originated in Budapest? This hypothesis can only be maintained if its founding arguments are actual facts.

When I reviewed the accuracy of the arguments, I found that the 3rd argument is false.

Consequently, Fact art was still-born in Budapest, because one of the arguments, from which we concluded its coming into being—the one, according to which no ism was yet born in Hungary—is wrong, no fact.

16. There was one ism that was born in Hungary: Bicsérdism.

17. Béla Bicsérdy died in America.

(around 1970/71)

The present time of the conceptual art

The art of Eastern Europe from 1980 to 1985 alternated between the two movements of Conceptualism and New painting (Expressionist sculpture, etc.) as well experiencing installation and performance art for the first time. By 1989/90, the "regime change" took place against the backdrop of postmodernism. Conceptual art did not disappear in post-communism, but rather reasserted itself as "postconceptualism" or "neoconceptualism." Since, the most significant developments represent the new geopolitical and art geography framework of the European Union within which we must now continue to interpret new artistic expressions. Using postmodern means, it would be most fitting to reinscribe our historical understanding within a postcolonial discourse. This would enable us

to tackle such phenomena as the long-standing inferiority complex of Eastern-European artists and the continuing rivalry and assertion of "difference" with which they seek to distinguish themselves from their Western peers. "I am an Eastern-Europe expert;" wrote the Hungarian writer Péter Esterházy in an interpretation of Endre Bojtár's aphorism, "this is like someone's Christmas dinner fish swimming around in water and claiming to be an expert of the bathtub." New phenomena and relationships are surfacing under these circumstances: young Eastern-European artists no longer only socialize at foreign/international locations but also have opportunity to meet one another. Their communication is no longer constrained to the English language, but they try to verbalize their aesthetic statements in each others' languages. The issues of a local national or ethnic minority or simply a cross-cultural encounter are catapulted into the spotlight of an interested international audience: such are the Jewish question, the refugees of the Serbo-Croatian war, the situation of Balkan artists, that of the Roma, relations between East and West Germans, between the Baltic states and Russia, and between Moldavians and Romanians. It transpires that the gender-orientated art history of our times had Eastern-European precursors in the 1960's, such as can be seen in the work of the Polish Magdalena Abakanovic, Alina Sapocznikow, Maria Jarema, Natalia L.L., Ewa Partum, Maria Pininska, Zofia Kulik, the Croatian Sanja Ivekovic, the Serbian Marija Abramovic, the Czech Zorka Saglova, the Slovak Jana Zelibska and the Hungarian Dóra Maurer or Orshi Drozdik. In almost every country new sources are unearthed for purposes of research, notably the documents of the secret police's department of "cultural defense". Extensive exhibitions of international scale open one after another on issues from our recent past, such as *Global Conceptualism* at the Queens Museum, *The Other Europe*

in Krakow, *Europa, Europa* in Bonn, and *After the Wall* in several European cities...Artists act as art historians and disclose previously conceptualizing periods (as with Charles Harrison, for example, and the Hungarian formation of "Kisvarsó" (Little Warsaw). New resources are developed by way of comparative history studies, inspiring the constant renewal of artistic activities, just as can be said of our own project.

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