

edit  
andras

**who's afraid of  
a new paradigm?**

**the old practice  
of art criticism  
of the east  
versus the new  
critical theory  
of the west**

● Let me begin by promptly apologizing for the apparent arrogance of the subtitle which, following an old pattern, considers the divisions inherent within Western culture as standing higher in the hierarchy of geopolitical divisions, and thus as more unequivocal than the division between the occidental and oriental cultures. In this usage the West stands for Western Europe and the United States, while the East is synonymous with the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, that is, the European post-Socialist countries. Even though the place of this conference, the former Yugoslavia, allows for such an interpretation, the time, the globalized world-time of postmodernism and postcolonialism works against it. Moreover, in this expanded world it looks like these terms retain less and less of their original meaning.

In the beginning of the nineties, in the aftermath of political changes, the world's attention was focused for a short while on the countries of the former Eastern Bloc (thus giving them their 15 minutes of fame), but this interest quickly dwindled away; time leaped over the region, and the attention of the Western world shifted instead to the Eastern world and its culture. A frequently voiced argument is that the region has only itself to blame for not having made the most of this special attention. But was the opportunity really there? Could this be the sole explanation for why the art of the region is hardly present on the global art scene, and that discourse seems to be unaware of it too? Could it be possible that this region does not contribute in any way to the global art world, and to general discourse on account of its incompatibility? - This is how some leading Western curators like to put it, qualifying the region's events as "second hand" phenomena, and advising its inhabitants to take crash courses and quick translations of the relevant literature for easterners to catch up theoretically with the West. Or could the other camp be right when saying that the East/West division is gone with the wind of the times, that it has, if you will, been buried under the ruins of the Berlin Wall, and that the Region has been integrated in a united Europe, whose language it has always used anyway.

Thus, these now obsolete questions no longer deserve to be mentioned. Even the opposition itself is irritating, expressing the arrogance of the West and the inferiority complex of the East - so goes the argument.

As if all of this were merely a matter of psychic condition, which could easily be changed with the help of oblivion and a change of rhetoric, that is, through self-persuasion. Is it possible to turn from a frog into a princess with just a simple swing of the magic wand? Or is this region, once forced into the same camp, actually tearing apart while pushing its borders further east? In that case, does this latter argument come from the western part of Eastern Europe, which, emphasizing difference, increasingly prefers the use of the term Central European, or to further specify the category, East-Central European in opposition to the "real" Eastern Europe and the Balkans?

It is difficult to face the past mental trauma, its repercussions and persisting elements, confront what was at first physical, then intellectual exclusion on one hand, and the aggressive striving for dominance on the other. Thus denial, repression and the sweeping of problems under the carpet is an understandable reaction. The world expects a satisfied, happy face from us. So smile, please! This is, after all, what we ourselves want as well, to forget the past and to think that we have already left the difficulties of the transition behind us. Personally, I believe those encapsulated, unattended problems and traumas return with a vengeance, and haunt us. But have we got a language to address them and to define our position?

I would not like to make the mistake of easy generalization. I am fully aware that the region has never been as homogenous as it may seem from the outside. The same set of problems doesn't apply to the individual countries in the region, each and every one having its own special configuration of those. But, based on my personal experiences and on consultations with colleagues working in the region, I still believe that in many cases the existing phenomena do have common roots. I am here, interested in these common roots in terms of the relation between eastern art criticism and new Western critical theory, albeit using the Hungarian situation as the starting point for my investigations. I would like to examine our relationship to current theoretical discourse and the charge of mutual incompatibility. In doing so I wish to shed light on problems and paradoxes and to raise questions to be explored further on.

In Western Europe, and especially in the United States, in the past twenty years, we have witnessed a paradigm shift in scientific thinking. New disciplines (e.g. cultural studies, visual studies) and new fields (e.g. women's studies, gay and lesbian studies, postcolonial studies) have emerged, which have eroded the solid and rigid tradition of writing art criticism and art history, shaking their very foundations. Although new critical theory or new art history has met with opposition, and there are disciplinary anxieties even as of today, this new way of thinking has largely pervaded education, book publishing, and the curatorial and critical practice alike. This new way of thinking, based on poststructuralist philosophy and on the awareness of micro-structures of power that build and legitimize reality through representation has created a multiplicity of voices and questioned the credibility of grand narratives.

1989 removed the political obstacles that prevented the former Soviet Bloc countries from participating in the general discourse. The new paradigm could even come in handy, as it could offer a wonderful possibility for the region's countries to join, as equals, the process of common thinking, and to fully articulate their own voices, thus liberated from the marginal position imposed on them by the modernist paradigm. And yet, the new critical practice is present only sporadically, the dominant reaction being either fervent opposition or total ignorance, along with a stubborn adherence to a version of modernism, which elsewhere has already lost its validity. In our part of the world this springs not only from a fear of losing power and disciplinary territorialism. What, then, is the cause of this phenomenon? What are those points of resistance, those remains of the mental walls from which the teachings of the new theories keep bouncing back? Could the widely held view be true, according to which the new theory, along with all its related assumptions, belongs to the domestic affairs of the West, thus it is no concern to us? Is every effort to adopt it an instance of symbolic violence?

The main pillar of new critical theory is the critique of the canon and normative judgment as well as the advocacy of multi-local situation replacing universalism. Sexism, nevertheless, is still present, along with traces of judgment based on canonized aesthetic value and along with claims

for the universal - as various speakers stated at the Clark Institute's recent conference in Williamstown (USA), organized to discuss new disciplines and the new writing of art history. From our Central and Eastern European point of view, to this list may be added the heritage of colonialism and the drive for dominance.

In the practice of Eastern and Central European art criticism the persistent survival of the elements of modernism is preventing the assimilation of new thinking. I must stress here that the modernist paradigm of the region is not the pure, transcendent formalism in the Greenbergian sense, since historical necessity has colored even the purest abstract art with a politicized avantgarde attitude characterizing Eastern European modernist art since the beginning of the XXth century. It displayed strong political messages, social utopianism with a sense of mission. In the era of state socialism, in the second half of the century, this politicized modernism, imbued with the spirit of the avant-garde, took on the traits, attitudes, and strategies of non-official art. In opposition to the conservative, official art whose task was the legitimization of power, it represented openness and mobility. It was also cosmopolitan as it kept up with international events, and it defined itself within that context. After the political changes and the transition, the attitudes of formerly non-official art, in its newly acquired position of power, changed radically, along with the critical practice supporting it. It began to show signs of strong resistance to the new Western theories it had not even seriously considered before. The former avant-garde considered these theories alien, conceived in a context different from ours, thus having no relevance for us. So these theories came to be treated as nothing more than a passing fad. For a position, which was itself authoritarian, canonical and exclusive - thus mirroring the very model it opposed - the multiplicity of subject positions, standards and interpretations, along with the questioning of the ruling rhetoric and narrative was totally unacceptable. (See Oriskova's lecture)

Modernism and postmodernism in our region seem to occupy oddly reversed positions, to borrow the phrase from my sociologist friend, Anna Szemere. She continues that "in the competing frameworks of modernist and postmodernist theories...the

debate's rhetoric revives old perennial East-European binaries, such as ... organic vs. imposed, stagnant vs. dynamic; timeless vs. timely, isolated vs. conversant with global culture." The fierce debate about postmodern views, gained momentum in Hungary at the end of the nineties: topics such as gender issues, women's art, gay and lesbian literature, postcolonialism, the new media, paradigm shift in art, and so forth, came out of their respective closets to enter public discourse. Szemere interprets the ensuing confrontations as ones in which "...the opponents [in this debate] address issues and employ discursive strategies that had originally been elaborated in the conflict between Westernizing ("zapadnyik") and nationalist elite many decades earlier", without of course applying the analogy directly. Such a position would be untenable in view of the fact that a significant part of the former opposition continues to renounce political and cultural rhetoric of nationalism. But Szemere's statement is valid according to which "modernists advocate an implicitly Eurocentric idea of art that is autonomous, canonical and tran-

scends politics, especially that of gender, sexual identity, race, and ethnicity. Postmodernist „westernizers", themselves profoundly critical of (mainstream) western tradition, emphasize the multiplicity of cultures and voices ... Whereas modernists rely on the traditional authority of the critic...postmodernists tend to define their role as interpreters.... The postmodernist's concern with identity politics and its penetration of art reminds the modernists ... of the worst excesses of the party state's cultural dictates." Let me add that the latter charge on the part of modernists amounts to an instant and fatal knockout. At the same time, disapproving the new theory's so called "ideological nature" creates the illusion that modernism's transcendent image of art is free of ideology, an assumption problematized by poststructuralist thought itself. "Postmodernists in turn, contend", Szemere claims, "that the modernists' ethnocentric and elitist dismissal of cultures and subcultures outside of the 'canon' is not only oppressive, but parochial as well. Many...modernists hold that postmodernism is ... another example of cultural

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imperialism. ..." Relating to the arguments about "postmodernist colonization versus modernist isolationism ...we must recognize an interesting paradox here." - she continues. "East European modernists, by virtue of their universalist claims about "Culture" and "Art" had traditionally turned to the West and to the `World` outside. In the new discursive context, however" - at least in present day Hungary - "they justify their claims with reference to cultural and regional distinctiveness" - and, I should emphasize, they do so from within the paradigm of modernism, along the lines of its established principles. Their adversaries, the postmodernists, she concludes, "by definition, should favor the partial, the local" - I would add, the different - "as against the universal...however, they find themselves in the odd role of advocating the „new" and „global" in art and culture." (Szemere, manuscript, 2001)

From this perspective, the East's detachment from the new theoretical discourse, our self-exclusion from the grid-structured and widely accessible criticism while taking the heroic posture of defending an old hierarchically structured, and by now highly problematic paradigm we used to know as modernism may be seen as an act of self-colonization.

The crumbling of the Twin Towers, these latter-day towers of Babel, has made the multilateral communication of equal partners painfully urgent. It highlighted the absurdity of aggressive uniformization brought on by a globalized world, and the indispensability of making the power accountable. But we are also warned about the enormous dangers inherent in the short-sighted extremist, fundamentalist beliefs, and in xenophobia, that is, in the demonization of the other, the different. This is a warning to our Central/East European region as well, where the reawakened and unleashed nationalisms may carry similar dangers.

At this time, there is probably no better place for studying the subtle workings of power as well as exploring the social construction of history and reality than Central and Eastern Europe, a region reborn and seeking its new identity. In the more established western democracies the functioning of power is far more sophisticated and thus more difficult to grasp. In our part of the world practically every generation experienced the full-scale redefinition of values on

all levels of everyday life. Truths became lies only to turn into truths again; old faiths and religions disappeared, while new ones sprang out of nowhere; national holidays and values have come and gone, symbols of power replaced for others. Streets came to be renamed, sometimes assuming their earlier names. Statues were demolished, by each regime in its own turn, with new statues taking their place. In Hungary, for example, the "court artists" of the Orban-regime are preparing to manufacture several dozens of Saint Stephen statues (in commemoration of our first king to convert Hungarian tribes into Christians), and the budget of the movie entitled *The Bridge Man*, created with the explicit intent to boost our national pride, has received governmental funding that is equivalent to more than one third of the annual subsidy allocated to Hungarian film production.

As we acknowledge that in our countries the word "power" still refers, primarily, to political power rather than power in the poststructuralist sense that pervades every human relation, we must consider not only the legacy of the formerly dissident status and rhetoric of modernist art, but also the partial survival (or revival) of the oppositional role. Due to the tight state control of cultural policy in the last few years in Hungary, aimed at strengthening "national-populist" values, the polarity between official and non-official art, along with oppositional attitudes survived as an undercurrent. In this shifting system of oppositions, the persons occupying the respective statuses of official and non-official artist changed and so did their rhetoric but the structure remained almost the same. The discreet charm of the situation is that the fault lines are now running between the two camps of the former opposition once considered united but, which, in fact was seriously divided. This situation creates the impression that modernism, historically associated with the opposition, would still hold its validity as a mode of speaking. And this presents one of the obstacles to scrutinizing both modernism and the conservative nationalist model of art as a site of power. Professional debates are still being articulated as the "battle between good guys and bad guys" and the former struggles in the name of the so-called "truth". Our most cherished values continue to be morality, ethics and an adherence to certain values. Of course in a political culture



shaped by totalitarian regimes it is indeed difficult to ignore the historical relevance of such values.

Under such circumstances, the kind of new critical thinking that questions the existence of originary facts, one singular truth and any kind of essentialism, and views art as a social construction, suddenly found itself caught in a crossfire. As Moxey states "...the writing of history becomes a kind of cultural poetics. The past becomes a place not where meaning is found, but where meaning is created." When it comes to rejecting the new theory, two profoundly different camps find themselves in the same boat. One argues for the purity and sanctity of art hovering above society and ideology; the other propagates the idea of national art and a primordial national character. From what vantage point can one critique modernism if it continues to be a holy cow, dominating the establishment art education, the teaching of theory, book publishing, curatorial and critical practices, and especially professional and general thought providing, as it does, a counterforce to a centrally controlled and manipulated art practice feeding on nationalism.

A close-up view can unmistakably distinguish between the two opposing attitudes; but stepping back and looking at the larger picture as critics of modernism, it is their conjunction, their interlinked character that is obvious. The explanation lies in the "loophole" of modernism or traditional art history writing, that is, in the context. Reference to the sociopolitical or cultural context of art offers strategies to deviate somewhat from the canon. Contextuality creates the illusion of appreciating our local values. It, however, remains an illusion, as long as this thought is still grounded in a faith in the universal nature of modernism; as long as it holds onto the canon of western art, its "autonomy", and predominantly whites, male "geniuses" of art.

A distinctly local enterprise is some critics' attempt to combine modernism with postmodernism by grafting certain elements and teachings of postmodernism onto the old building of modernism, while conveniently leaving out others. The criteria of the "selection" from among several disparate elements are set up by reference to the unique sociocultural context: - some things we accept, but not others, thanks very much. The point of the exercise is to renovate modernism, as well as to tame the

new creature called postmodernism, and thus to prevent the assimilation of a far more radical new critical theory on our ground that would challenge the basic assumptions of modernism. An analogy to this configuration is to be found in the blending of different historical formations in the region that resulted in the coexistence of semi-feudal, semi-socialist and semi-capitalist elements in our society.

In order to avoid the theoretical trap of misusing the concept of "context", new critical thinking prefers the term "framing" when stating that context is not a given to be peeled away as accurately and elaborately as possible in order to attain the core of truth; rather we choose it and therefore we should know where that context comes from. As Moxey succinctly said: "The introduction of feminist, gay and lesbian, and postcolonial forms of historical interpretation has ensured that the history of art now takes multiple forms. Histories written from these perspectives tell very different stories about the same subject matter ... Art history speaks with many voices, voices that no longer seek to conceal them beneath the cloak of 'objectivity'. Rather than claim privileged access to the past by speaking in the classless, genderless, nationless 'voice from nowhere', art historians now articulate the attitudes and values that inform their narratives." (Moxey, lecture at CEU, 2001) These parallel histories use the teachings of contemporary linguistics, semiotics and psychoanalysis, as they analyze the local configurations or situated representations of male-female and other power relations, while totally dismissing the isolated national interpretation. This triggers fear in those who wish to reinvent national identity and rewrite what is believed to be a repressed and oppressed "real" national history and art. Similarly, postmodern narratives elicit anxiety among those, too, who want to cleanse art from this multiply ideologized, re-ideologized and thoroughly compromised content. We thus propose that the new theory of the west and the historical situation of the east have come to work against one another in an odd configuration. We must take this circumstance into consideration when criticizing what seems to be an outdated form of Eastern art criticism. We must also remember that there was an earlier example for such cross-configuration, albeit with opposing value implications. To use Serge Guilbaut's turn of phrase, we

could say that “the west stole the idea of social history”, since the roots of the new critical thinking can be traced back to our very own Central and Eastern Europe and the former Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, a part of Europe now disparaged as resistant to the renewal of social history, inspired by Marxism and psychoanalysis which gave the intellectual foundations to much current theorizing in the West.

Some thirty years ago the core generation of new critical thinking, the leftist intellectuals of the West rediscovered social history as an outgrowth of the radical movements of '68. Meanwhile, the intellectuals of the East gradually distanced themselves from it, because ideologies and disciplines associated with a strongly emphasized adjective “social” had been abused, oversimplified and manipulated in our societies and eventually discredited by serious thinkers. The state's official cultural policy and Marxism were closely interlinked, which turned modernism, into the style of dissident art. Even in our days the very mention of Marxism is equivalent with moral suicide. Therefore, the new art history remains suspect because of its problematic pedigree, and the shadow of this suspicion falls on the entire discipline, despite the fact that its more recent currents of new criticism has distanced itself considerably from its point of origin. It includes the critique of Marxism just as that of any monolithic and objectivistic ideology. The bad reputation of Marxism, its haunting spirit, and critics' will to dissociate themselves from it is palpable in even those formerly Eastern Bloc countries where Marxist art history either never existed or did only for a very short time. However, critical practice did use Marxism as ideological underpinning or a point of reference. In everyday practice modernism defined itself in terms of this demonized “other”, a critical practice saturated and controlled by official politics. It was in this struggle through which modernism built up and articulated its alternative moral order and sense of mission, defended the idea of pure art far beyond politics, or presented itself as the proponent of “truth” and resistance. How could one expect Eastern European modernists to abandon this position, the source of what used to be its moral capital?

The antipolitical stance is in clear parallel with the rejection of feminist critical practice and the study of gender relations in

art, the reason being that its beginnings coincided with the feminist political movement. Modernists argue that such currents are of no interest to us because, for various reasons, feminism had never existed as a political force in our country. To quote my colleague, Katalin Tímár: “It is often argued that postcolonialism is completely inadequate and unnecessary, because of the absence, in Hungary, of the classical colonialist and neocolonialist periods.” (Tímár, 2001). This, again, is stated on the grounds that the said theory was born in a different sociohistorical context and thus cannot be applied to our own. In contrast to this, I believe that feminist art history and the foundations of postcolonialist theory both carry significance beyond the context of their birthplace. Recently, we heard the same arguments made in relation to gay and lesbian literature, adding further justification to modernists' inherent aversion to them.

East and West occupy cross-positions with each other in other ways as well. While the once exclusive art concept of the West had to be replaced by a geographically far more inclusive interpretation of art embracing non-western cultures, certain “more western” countries of the former Eastern Bloc took the opportunity to resolve their long-standing schizophrenia related to geopolitical mapping. They desperately wanted to shake off the burden of being classified as “eastern”. So what we see is that Eastern Europe is busy trying to construct new national and political identities after a long period of seclusion, oppression and uniformity; an endeavor pointing in the direction of Eurocentrism (i.e. the European Union). Simultaneously the new theory of the West has turned against any forms of Eurocentrism and - at least on a theoretical level - developed a form of thought that is global and includes Asia, Africa, Australia, etc.

In the same way as certain elements and key notions of critical thinking - such as politics, ideology, truth, psychology, gender, etc - carry different meanings in western theory and eastern practice, the critical approach itself has different connotations and meanings. In the forty years of state socialism the voice of public criticism was monopolized by the party-state. As a result of this an official art critic ruled over life and death and behaved accordingly. Those critics, who strived to protect their professional integrity, refrained from writing any deroga-



tory criticism of their contemporaries so as to avoid any complicity with the officialdom. The borderline between professional and political criticism was blurry. Later on, this heritage once again prevented the establishment of criticism because any critical comments could easily be translated into a political attack and on those grounds discredited. Examples abound if we look at the recent and ongoing public debates in Hungary, surrounding the paradigm shift.

One cannot overemphasize the importance of conceptual divergences and semantic differences between East and West. Critics on the other side, tend not to take these into account when they recognize an apparent discursive incompatibility. They even become impatient and frustrated when their eastern colleagues do not couch their opinions and experiences strictly in the framework of western academic discourse. But to what extent does western discourse enable the articulation of eastern experiences ? Eastern European art professionals feel uneasy using the new discourse. After all, these frameworks are like clothes that were tailored to someone else's body size rather than his or her own. Even though the new theory claims the need to „bring more diversity to the discussion” and rejects hierarchies , the theory itself is a product of deconstructing the mainstream and canon of western art. Its examples refer to their context in which the marginalized history of Eastern Europe has not been included. Thus the new theory is not a perfect fit for the deconstruction of this marginalized part of modernist discourse. The paradigm of modernism organized around pure notions of style, sterile categories, and the production of innovation and originality could not accommodate all the local expressions, variations, „reworkings”, „belated phenomena” and mixed style categories (e.g. cubofuturism, cuboexpressionism, etc.), which lie beyond the known, well-trodden paths. It is similarly difficult to apply the criticism and methodology developed for the western mainstream because given the different historical situation and local history of the region, the same categories and notions carry different meanings and configure in different ways. Thus, assuming that after the fall of the Iron Curtain the new theory became accessible to all and everyone, western theorists do not understand why their eastern colleagues still hesitate to

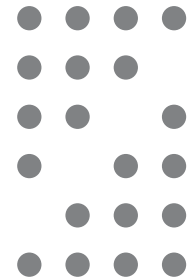
assimilate the „ready-made” theory. It is precisely this differing context that they ignore; and it is their own reification of their conceptual tool-kit that will prevent them from hearing the voices which do not quite fit into their discourse. As a result, when trying to make western theory and eastern practice congruent, only those parts of them are visible which are indeed congruent. For us, however, the really interesting parts are those where the conjunctions and concurrences are merely apparent. One of the tasks of eastern art critical practice could be the undoing of these apparent conjunctions, the elucidation of these subtle distinctions, since these are invisible to those well-meaning, western colleagues who arrive in Budapest, Belgrade, Warsaw or Zagreb with the aim of helping to „master the theory”.

Thanks to our tradition of dominance and intervention, and due to discursive incompatibility between East and West, the art of the region has become a breeding-ground for cultural colonialism. Western professional oeuvres (books, journal articles, and so forth) have been quickly produced often even without the knowledge of the local language and cultural background. Such work instantly became jumping boards for higher positions: it was sufficient to incorporate and place in a new context the source material produced by the anonymous Eastern European researcher - for which the eastern colleagues often were not even given credit - and to present it in the critical language of the West. This practice eventually led to a conflicting situation: in the process of joining the global scene it became impossible for Eastern European art, art history, artists and curators to circumvent these „compatible channels”, or researchers and institutions which had become authorities on the subject. This made the interpretation, moreover the critique of the situation considerably more difficult, while at the same time widening the rift between the position of researchers.

Keith Moxey, in his summer lecture at CEU dealing with the cultural turn, raises the following issues: “What might the implications of what I have called a post-structuralist poetics of history have for the conduct of art history in Eastern Europe? What relevance would it have for the project of giving significance to the past in this part of the world? Clearly my experience

does not allow me to make more than the most general comments on this subject. If my lecture has struck any sort of chord here today, it is up to you to try to think this through for yourselves. There is no doubt in my mind, for example, that the history of Eastern European art has suffered from the shadow of the master narrative of the West. ... Eastern Europe suffers the same fate as Africa, Asia and Latin America. The point is not necessarily to attempt to set the record straight by adding or inserting local events into the framework of the western narrative, for there is no way in which one set of events can be conceived of as equivalent to the others." (Moxey, lecture, CEU, 2001) While I completely agree with the absurdity of direct adaptation, based on all of the above I believe that in spite of all the analogous traits, Eastern Europe is not in the same position as the "other" of western civilization, i.e. eastern civilization and all the other regions excluded from the concept of art. The formerly colonized regions were able to incorporate and further develop the teachings of poststructuralist philosophy and the deconstructionist methods of feminist criticism more quickly and more markedly, and to develop a theory of post-colonialism, as they were at the opposite end of the scale relative to the norm. That region, however, which did have a place in the dominant paradigm, only a secondary one, as befitted the "other" within the dominant paradigm, had to first come to terms with the schizophrenia of outside and inside, i.e. with the problem of belonging. Meanwhile, it continues to carry the burden of its different modernism born from a different historical situation, at a moment in history when these said cross-positions dim our sight with deceptive mirages. In terms of our own, local concept of East and West, we can only agree with Dipesh Chakravarty and Moxey, who say: "...what is needed, is a complex negotiation or dialogue between East and West, a dialogue which would translate one set of circumstances into the other without losing the specificity of each. Doing so would involve something like Walter Benjamin's conception of translation." However, what the dialogue would require from the East is to recover from the obsession of modernism and to deconstruct the remnants of the mental wall, in order to recognize the advantages of the new theory. On the other hand, this requires more

openness on the part of the West if it wants to understand and tolerate the reasons for this divergence, and to hear the foreign, and still somewhat inarticulate voices. ●



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