

Doing culture under state-socialism: Actors, events, and interconnections: An introduction

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The main title of the present issue of *Comparative* “Doing culture under state-socialism” appears to sufficiently identify both a time period and a geographical location. In the articles below, however, this period is explicitly or implicitly framed as the Cold War, which conceptually places actors, events and interconnections (as indicated in the subtitle) in a broader transnational context. It is in reaction to an emerging research area that the Cold War is being proposed as a meaningful frame for drafting a more globally inscribed cultural history of East Central Europe. These were decades in which international relations were defined by conflicting world views and in which the domains of both high and popular culture were heavily drawn into the sphere of political competition. Nevertheless, the role that culture – its mainstream or dissident variations – cultural exchange and cultural politics played in the development of the Cold War is still far from being fully charted. Part of this incomplete picture is that the cultural production of state-socialist Eastern Europe has received little serious scholarly attention for over a decade immediately following the political system change in the region. A narrow set of narrative constructs has been in general use to account for the cultural politics of the socialist era. The crudest formulations have viewed the artistic output of the pre-1989 period as well-designed manipulation of the communist propaganda and ideology, incapacitated through structures of censorship and the isolation secured by the Iron Curtain. This undifferentiated image has been often projected onto the entire East Block and the entire four or five decades. Authors exploring Cold War Cultures or the Cultural Cold War, however, increasingly acknowledge that “cold warriors” on both sides of the Iron

Curtain massively deployed culture as an instrument in both international relations and diplomacy.¹

The selection of articles below is based on material presented at an international workshop held in June 2013 at the Leipzig Centre for the History and Culture of East Central Europe (GWZO). The workshop brought together researchers whose work engages with the transnational networks and the cross-border flow of cultural actors (artists, intellectuals, cultural politicians, politically active individuals, etc.), intellectual trends and cultural practices that never ceased despite the relevance of the Iron Curtain and national borders. These investigations also reckon with institutional structures and policies that constrained or enabled these flows in the given period. On the occasion of the workshop, two research interests and projects met. One of them was the GWZO research group “Ostmitteleuropa Transnational” studying the conditions and challenges of globalisation in East-Central European history in an extended time frame, from the late 19th century to the present, with a special focus on the period of state-socialism.² The research method of the group is not only transnational but also trans- or interdisciplinary as the work straddles the major fields of political, economic, and cultural history as well as the study of migration and international organisations. The workshop was at the same time the closing event of a research-based exhibition project *Agents and Provocateurs*,³ surveying certain forms of confrontation: agency and provocation, both understood as dissenting artistic attitudes. The project explored to what degree these attitudes have proved to be viable forms of protest in different and changing political contexts. Starting out from the counter-cultural scenes of state-socialist East Central Europe where provocation and irritation often featured as vehicles of artists’ defiance, we wanted to explore what the actual critical potential of provocation as social protest has been, and whether „being oppositional” was a (self-)chosen stance, or the narrow confines of a repressive regime constituted dissident thinkers so? Wanting to avoid tearing socialist Eastern Europe away from its broader context, we took a comparative approach and wished to find out how allegedly free liberal democracies treated their own counter-culture and dissidents, and what political or radical art looked like in these societies during the past couple of decades.

Interrogating this topic was a response to a disbalance observable in scholarly and curatorial work emerging in ex-East Bloc countries after the system change of 1989/91.

1 See e.g., J. Gienow-Hecht, Culture and the Cold War in Europe, in: M. P. Leffler/O. A. Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Cambridge, 2010, p. 398–419; or J. Segal, Cultural Propaganda and the Use of Art in East and West, in: Gh. Cliveti/A.-B. Ceobanu/A. Vitalaru/I. Nistor (eds.), *Romanian and European Diplomacy. From Cabinet Diplomacy to the 21st Century Challenges*, Iasi, 2012, p. 154-164.

2 As of 2014, the full name of the research group is “Zeitgeschichte Ostmitteleuropas in transnationaler Perspektive” whereby the focus on the contemporary period is further accentuated. For further details visit the corresponding page of the GWZO website: https://www.uni-leipzig.de/~gwzo/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1126&Itemid=1777

3 The project and show was coordinated and curated by Beata Hock and Franciska Zólyom; the exhibition was on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art – Dunaújváros, Hungary and Hartware MedienKunstVerein, Dortmund, Germany. The project was realised with the support of Erste Stiftung and the Visegrad Fund.

Publications and survey exhibitions produced in the 1990s have focused, with very few exceptions, on the recapitulation of events and actors linked to the un- or semi-official cultural sphere in state-socialist societies. This cultural underground was referred to with various names. “Counter culture”, “cultural opposition”, “(neo-)avant-garde” or operations “in the grey zone” became umbrella terms to signify any artistic activity that did not submit to official party ideology. Since members of this “counter-cultural” scene turned away from authorized public activity and relied instead on a parallel set of communicational channels, they saw themselves as operating in a second, or parallel public sphere. The strong post-1989 focus on the semi-official cultural arena can be explained by the fact that these activities had to go largely undocumented during socialist times and they were therefore missing from the existing cultural historiography of individual countries. At the same time, in many of these recent accounts, an inherent and undisputed worth was attached to oppositional culture. Nowadays as state-socialism is being gradually historicized, this automated value-assignment appears to be a fixture of narratives on art under socialism. Part and parcel of this narration are both the vilification of the Soviet Union for introducing and then imposing a restrictive cultural policy on its satellite countries and a vision of the (not clearly circumscribed) “West” as the site of intellectual and artistic freedom. This latter perception became contested as early as in the 1960s when the involvement of the CIA and other state or privately funded bodies in both US domestic cultural policy and cultural activities abroad was revealed.⁴ The United States targeted some European countries (most particularly Italy, France, divided Germany and Great Britain) where, after World War II, socialist thought continued to provide a source of inspiration for those entertaining ideas of radical social change. Anti-communist advocacy required more refined tactics in Latin-America where, due to the continent’s political legacy, socialism and communism could not be easily discredited, western liberal individualism or notions of artistic freedom had less purchase, and the United States, especially after its interference in Latin-American revolutions, got a bad press.⁵ This controversy and the recognition that the arts and culture were employed, and heavily subsidized, as powerful weapons in the political competition on both sides of the Iron Curtain, however, does not seem to have impacted on cultural historical thinking in Eastern Europe. Therewith a couple of other notions and aspects are also perpetuated – or ignored, as the case may be. Perpetuated has been a kind of vision of cultural traffic in which Eastern Europe looks invariably towards the West, wishing to confirm its Euro-

4 By the 1990s, this contestation expanded into a field of considerable scholarly and general interest; for some of the key arguments, consult S. Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, Chicago, 1985; F.S. Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, London, 1999; S. Nilsen, *Projecting America, 1958: Film and Cultural Diplomacy at the Brussels World’s Fair*, Jefferson, 2011, or D. Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War*, Oxford, 2003.

5 Here publications and organisations of the non-communist left were sponsored by the Congress for Cultural Freedom and hence by CIA money. Cf. R. Cobb, *Promoting Literature in the Most Dangerous Area in the World. The Cold War, the Boom, and Mundo Nuevo*, in: G. Barnhisel/C. Tur, eds, *Pressing the Fight: Print, Propaganda, and the Cold War*, Amherst, 2010, 231–50.

pean belonging. This urge then effectively prevented the recognition of the new cultural dependencies, or the appreciation of new communication and distribution channels that opened up in a re-arranged post-war world. Thus, the surely international (and inter-continental) character and reach of cultural exchanges among the “brotherly states” of the socialist world have been long underrated, if not altogether ignored, in favour of comparisons with the more dominant Euro-Atlantic cultural arena.

While most of the contributions in this issue do keep their focus on East-West encounters, they pose novel questions within this relatively conventional framing. Examining the involvement of Eastern European dissident intellectuals and artists in East-West exchanges, *Edit Sasvári* and *Victoria Harms* shift the focus onto the kind of potentialities Western intelligentsia saw in taking up the defense of East European dissidents. In “Eastern Europe Under Western Eyes”, Sasvári reconstruct a little researched key cultural event of the Cold War, the so-called “Dissident Biennale” in Venice in 1977.⁶ Situating the event in the over-politicised and fairly left-leaning Italian cultural scene of the 1970s, the author shows how the ambition of individual cultural agents and the power struggles within Italian domestic politics, along with the interests and constraints dictated by cultural diplomacy across political blocs all came together to shape the programme and realisation of this international cultural event. Taking her reconstruction to a daring conclusion, Sasvári suggests that it was actually the Western Left that called to life the enduring heroic image of oppositional art under East European socialist dictatorships. Harm’s article “Central Europe in Manhattan: Why Hungarian dissidents mattered to New York intellectuals” comments on the *Biennale Dissenso* from the perspective of East Coast *litterati* who travelled to Italy to attend the event. Her account then broadens up to explicate why, even under the conditions of the *détente*, the West still needed the image and actual presence of East Bloc dissidents. Among other things, this had to do with the changing vocabulary of social critique from the 1960s to the 70s and 80s. Relinquishing the utopia of radical anti-imperialist struggle, the liberal ideal of human rights became the new language of political claims making by the 1980s, which also shifted the terrain of political solidarity from Third World revolutions to Second World dissident cultures.⁷

Like all contributions in the volume, *Michael Esch’s* essay “Transfers, Netzwerke und produktive Missverständnisse: *Plastic People, Velvet Underground* und das Verhältnis zwischen westlicher und östlicher Dissidenz 1965–1978“ defies popular imaginations about hermetically isolated cultural landscapes and heavily persecuted counter-cultural actors behind the Iron Curtain. Operating with the concept of cultural transfer and taking into account the reality that cultural information was often only partially and sporadi-

6 At the workshop in GWZO, Maria-Kristiina Soomre reported on this topic, but since an article by her is already accessible in English, the Editor invited Edit Sasvári to make available another set of research results on the subject for international audiences. Please consult M. K. Soomre, Art, Politics and Exhibitions: (Re)writing the History of (Re)presentations, in: *Studies on Art and Architecture (Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi)*, 21(2012) 3–4, 106–121.

7 On this see also J. Mark/R. Gildea/N. Pas, European Radicals and the Third World: Imagined Solidarities and Radical Networks 1958–73, in: *Cultural and Social History* 8 (2011), 4, 449–471.

cally available across the political blocs, the author uncovers transnational elements in the formation of youth and counter-cultures in different but increasingly converging political-economic settings. Esch suggests that a degree of mutual East-West inspiration and transfer was observable in the case of the Czech music band *Plastic People of the Universe*. The possibility and actuality of two-directional transfers is reinforced in *Jeanine Harder's* contribution „Polnische Filmplakate aus transnationaler Sicht“, where the author describes the leading role Polish posters assumed in the international domain of graphic art, also indicating how Polish cultural officials embraced and adopted this success to their own diplomatic interests. Harder also relativizes the notion of censorship by pointing to how not only political prescriptions but profit and industrial considerations may put constraints on artistic freedom, the latter being the case with *Plakatkunst* in market economies.

Finally, *Markus Kenzler* investigates the stimuli that revolutions and freedom fights in Latin-America, Africa and Asia provided for GDR artists. As Kenzler argues, several painters and sculptors occasionally disregarded, in their pictorial work, their politicians' official pronouncements both on the required style of artistic expression and the secularization of the socialist lifeworld. By turning to Christian symbolism in the depiction of “hot topics” in current international politics, some of these artists expressed their enthusiasm for a kind of “liveable” socialism whereby they also formulated implicit or explicit criticism towards their own political regime. While many recent Cultural Studies projects on the Cold War period often instrumentalise artworks in the service of formulating an argument and forego any analysis from an art historical or aesthetic point of view, Kenzler's text masterly combines the examination of historical context and pictorial analysis.

In their approach, the articles collected for this issue offer less ideologically loaded analyses than what has long characterized texts written on arts and culture in socialist times. When investigating the cultural history of Eastern European countries under “actually existing socialism”, the authors in this volume do not remain within the geographical boundaries of individual countries or the Soviet Bloc but attend to interactions of a much broader scope. They pose questions about how liaisons and co-operations had been sought, established, and regulated within and across political blocs on the level of official cultural politics and on a grassroots/informal level. It is the Editor's hope that, thanks to their approach and methodology, these texts will help further diversify an ossified view on cultural production within the Eastern Bloc in Cold War times.