

Globalizing East European Art Histories. Past and Present, edited by Beáta Hock, Anu Allas, New York-London, Routledge, 2018, 220 p.

This collection of essays is dedicated to the memory and the legacy of Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski (1952-2015). Considered a pioneer and ‘leading voice’ for a new generation of scholars in East European art history, Piotrowski gained international recognition thanks to ground-breaking studies such as *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989* (2009) and *Art and Democracy in Post-communist Europe* (2011). These and other texts permeate the theoretical and methodological framework of the collected essays, thus proving the *longue durée* of his undertakings and their applicability to a variety of historical, geographical and cultural contexts. The slogan, “think global, act local”, was put into practice by Piotrowski and his growing community of fellows, through a deontological obligation to adopt English as the universal idiom of communication, in addition to East European languages as the first-hand tool in order to enhance in-depth inquiry. In his understanding, polyglotism is meant as a form of polycentrism, consistently applied to the new geography of the arts that he addressed in his pivotal theory of “horizontal art history”. The present volume is a crucial outcome, and a posthumous homage, to such an intellectual endeavor.

The first task of the editors consists in building bridges between long established and compartmentalized disciplines, such as art history and East European studies, and younger fields derived from the colonial studies, such as global art history and world art studies. Their challenge is to overcome diffusionistic theories which, by postulating opposite categories such as center and periphery, influence and imitation, original and copy, produced binary and asymmetrical paradigms. These arguments from a hegemonic (West)-eurocentric perspective have generated enduring myths in the narrative of East European art history, like the construction of a hermetically isolated and homogenous gray zone, branded in the years of the cultural Cold War as the ‘Eastern bloc’, whose art production is inexorably belated and backward. Today such categories are inadequate to investigate the entangled art histories of this complex area. These and many other methodological concerns and issues inform the illuminating introduction compiled by one of the editors, Beáta Hock.

The volume is structured in four thematic parts, each containing three to four essays. The main task of the first part is to undermine the traditional correspondence between art historiography and national history. In doing so, the four authors apply different scales, be it lower (local, regional), or higher (international, transnational, global, planetary) to the scope of the “national container”. Tomasz Grusiecki questions the peripheral status historically ascribed to the arts from the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania in the 16th and 17th centuries, shedding light on a network of porous cultural transfers, where assimilation, adaptation and reinvention of Western and Ottoman patterns and artifacts were the outcome of both intentional cultural policies and unexpected mutations. In her methodological survey, Beáta Hock outlines a map

of cross-border alternative trajectories in the study of world art histories as a supportive instrument in order to debunk hard-to-die common places generated by a vertical art history, and to reinstate a more inclusive spectrum of art strategies and practices. In doing so, she underscores the functional role of international expos and exhibitions as cultural encounters for marginal countries and underrepresented artists, who could make use of such “platforms of exchange” by establishing contact and sharing ideas and projects. Kristóf Nagy reconstructs a still debated chapter in the history of late socialist Eastern Europe, examining the agenda of the Soros Foundation in Hungary in fostering the transition of the local art actors and institutions into the ‘global contemporary’. Maja and Reuben Fowkes investigate the strategies adopted by a wide range of unofficial artists across socialist Europe as their personal responses to environmental issues, at a time when ecology started to be perceived worldwide as a ‘planetary’ matter.

The second part of the book is devoted to forms and identities of hybridity in the visual culture, iconography, artistic practice and its critical reception, based on a selection of case studies spanning over several centuries. Carolyn C. Guile reassesses the visual culture of early modern Poland focusing on the “politics of portraiture” as a comprehensive genre, a cross-over of visual global references derived from Poland’s factual or imagined ‘Others’. By charting the presence of Polish artists at the Venice Art Biennale around 1900, Jörg Scheller argues that phenomena now generally associated with the ‘global contemporary’, such as migration, cosmopolitanism, diaspora, transculturality and cohabitation are *de facto* much older, thus proposing to reverse the prospective suggested by the title of the volume into *Eastern Europeanizing Globalization*. Sarah M. Schlachetzky examines the debate on architecture and urban planning in interwar Breslau/Wrocław around two opposite positions: one informed by the ‘international style’, high-rise modernism, and a vertical vision of the city, the other by a down-to-earth, horizontal and decentralized blueprint; a debate whose arguments are not limited to theoretical and aesthetical disputes, but on the contrary raise social questions affecting the life of the local communities.

The third part primarily addresses topics from Eastern Europe under socialist rule. The title itself, *Global Communities and the Traffic in Ideas*, touches upon the so-called porosity of the Iron Curtain, and the circulation of ideas and texts within official and unofficial cultures and across ideological boundaries. Agata Jakubowska underscores the significance of selected art pieces by female artists in socialist Poland as a rejection to any form of political activism, be it the State ideology or the philosophical and feminist constructions ascribed to them by Western art critics, hence providing an illuminating example of fault lines and missed expectations across divided Europe. The second book editor Anu Allas analyses the manifesto *Actual University: Ten Lessons* by Czech artist Milan Knížák (1966-68) on the backdrop of the emerging neo-avant-garde, focusing on the self-positioning of the artist towards global trends such as Fluxus, Existentialism and Eastern Philosophies. Katarzyna Cytlak expands the scope of the general survey to transatlantic cultural exchanges,

highlighting the reception of mail and performing arts from Eastern Europe within the circles of Latin America neo-avant-garde and their role as a catalyst for the “self-invention” of cutting-edge collectives, like the Centre for Art and Communication in Buenos Aires. The essay provides a compelling case of “margin-margin” cultural transfer, motivated by anti-imperialist solidarity, and endowed with symmetrical and egalitarian relations.

The fourth and final part concentrates on contemporary art production, focusing on some present-day artistic and curatorial practices. Joanna Sokołowska presents some artistic positions from her experience as an art curator, showing how contemporary artists (not necessarily from Eastern European focus) shape and challenge global geography and the related mechanisms, such as the capital’s flow and deterritorialization. Amy Bryzgel charts a handful of performances dealing with key-prerogatives of globalization such as the flow of cultural goods, the circulation of citizens and the policy of inclusion and exclusion sanctioned by the European Union, which is particularly relevant for geo-political entities, especially in the Balkan region, afflicted by a double condition (post-socialist and post-conflict). In the last essay, Alpesh Kantilal Patel explores two singular positions of contemporary art practices from World War II Asian America and Postwar Soviet Estonia, where issues concerning national and gender identities are interconnected, thus proving a productive intersection of ‘minor transnationalisms’.

The collected case studies are not intended to equally shed light on the mosaics of cultures and art histories covered by the extensive – and to some extent problematic – area of Eastern Europe, but rather to “surpass and re-conceptualize traditional regional boundaries” (p. 18). At the same time, it cannot go unnoticed that, Poland, among the cases treated, occupies a dominant position, from the modern ages up to its present-day status as member State of the European Union. This unbalanced coverage is partially justified by the genesis of the book as a collection of conference proceedings, held in the Galeria Labirynt in Lublin in 2014. And the pluralistic and amorphous nature of Polish artistic culture, addressed in several essays, can be considered extremely pertinent for the given object of study. On the other hand, it would be meaningful to include a wider selection of case studies, for instance from Russia (given also the relevance assigned to the Imperial structures acknowledged in the introduction), which here seems overlooked. Nevertheless, the book is both an essential compendium and a resourceful reference text, sustained by a solid and up-to-date theoretical discourse and empirical inquiry. It represents a critical contribution to area studies such as East European studies, opening up to a plethora of transnational histories in a strong comparative approach, in accordance with the ultimate mission “to restore the diverse ways in which eastern European art scenes have always already been entangled with actors and institutions in a wider world” (p. 6).

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