



Painting

Discursive Battlefield and Intermedial Laboratory

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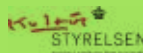
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MAĽBA V POSTMEDIÁLNO M VEKU/ PAINTING IN THE POSTMEDIAL AGE

**ZBORNÍK Z MEDZINÁRODNÉHO SYMPÓZIA VENOVANÉHO
PROBLÉMOM SÚČASNEJ MAĽBY/ PROCEEDINGS FROM AN
INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM DEDICATED TO THE PROBLEMS
OF CONTEMPORARY PAINTING**

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EXPANDED PAINTING: DISCURSIVE BATTLEFIELD AND INTERMEDIAL LABORATORY

ANNE RING PETERSEN

Abstract

The symposium's central issue of the ongoing struggle of painting – leading to recurrent announcements of its 'demise' and subsequently of its 'return' – will serve as point of departure for an examination of 'expanded painting'. This paper proposes that contemporary painting is not only a field of incessant disciplinary and discursive battles over the essentially self-reflective question of "What is painting?" Over the last decades it has also become an intermedial laboratory where artists experiment with developing a connective aesthetic in the interface between painting and other media. Accordingly, it has become a commonly held opinion that painting has transformed itself into an expanded field and thus renewed itself – again. This paper argues that in recent decades a remarkable number of painters have explored the possibility of developing painting by redefining what 'space' is in relation to painting. Much energy has been put into expanding painting physically by exploring painting's relations to objects, space, place, and 'the everyday'. The paper focuses on works of art that are conceived as an installation based on the medium of painting, including works by Slovak artists Dorota Sadovská and Daniel Fischer. Its discussion of the ways in which the transformation of painting into installation affects the relationship between the work and its contexts will ultimately lead to a consideration of how Slovak art is positioned in relation to the Western art world understood as a system of centres and peripheries.

Keywords: expanded painting – intermediality – installation – Western art world – Slovak art – Dorota Sadovská – Daniel Fischer

The central theme of this symposium is the reasons for the seemingly cyclical demise and subsequent return of painting in the course of the 20th and early 21st century. I would like to open it up by quoting two artists, a Slovak and a Dane.¹

¹ I am grateful to Jana Geržová for providing me with some fascinating portfolios of Slovak artists as well as an excerpt of her own illuminating book *Talks about Painting. An Overview of Slovak Painting Through Oral History* (Bratislava: Slovart a VŠVU 2009). Without this material and Jana's challenging brief of looking at some of these artists through the thesis of my essay "Painting Spaces"

In an interview with Jana Geržová, Slovak painter Daniel Brunovský rejects the notion of the death of painting in the 20th century with the following words, "Firstly, painting has never died. The second succession of painting in our country in the late 1990s occurred because you have allowed it to." The 'you' Brunovský attacks is not only the interviewer but rather implicates 'theoreticians' in general, specifically art historians and critics who in his view control the *verbal discourses* on painting and contemporary art. So he continues, "People, who in the 1990s favoured conceptual art like you, suddenly care about painting. I don't know why you care about painting now, if you did not care about it ten years ago."²

The second quote is by the Danish-Israeli artist Tal R. who likewise supports the idea that painting is still, and always, alive and kicking:

The monster of painting absorbs you with lightning speed; the great, embracing and possessive mother of painting. Even street art is roped in – for better or for worse. And in there you will meet all the others, all the other artists that you thought you rebelled against. You will meet all the old cousins, all the old arseholes and ghosts. It is a scary place, and it is here, in the centre, that *The Battle* takes place. But it is here you should be because you will end up as a diehard if you try to stay on the periphery. The challenge is to be in the centre where the others are sitting.³

For Tal R. as well as Brunovský, painting is a battlefield but for different reasons and with different combatants. For Tal R., painting is a battle fought between the best of peers. It is a fight against famous artists, past and present, that one needs to rebel against to establish one's own position as an artist who is taking the lead in painting. *The Battle* is ongoing, thus securing the continuity as well as the continual transformation of the practice of painting. For Brunovský, the battle for the power to define the character and historical role of painting is more complicated because it is fought in *two different fields*: that of artistic *practice* and that of verbal *discourse*. He suggests that in terms of artistic practise, painting is

from 2010, this paper would no doubt have become less pertinent to this symposium on *Painting in the Postmedial Age*.

² Daniel Brunovský quoted from the case study "The Death of Painting and Related Issues". In Jana Geržová: *Talks about Painting: An Overview of Slovak Painting Through Oral History*. Bratislava: Slovart and VŠVJ 2009, p. 385.

³ ROSS, Trine: „Where Death is an Exploding Strawberry“. Interview with Tal R. In: *Politiken*, 1. september 2007.

a steady medium, an almost anthropological phenomenon. The implication of his statement is that the notion of the demise of painting is a discursive construction coined by the theorists who are in power of the discourse on art. Here 'discourse' is taken to be a scholarly and critical instrument for mapping historical movements in art as well as a marketing tool for the art market with its constant need to present novelties. As a result, painting can alternately be declared dead and resurrected in the *discourse* of painting despite the fact that painting has been carried on as an artistic *practice* for centuries without interruption.

As an art historian, I belong to the theorists' camp, but with regards to the notion of the demise and return of painting I agree with the two artists. Painting is a constant in Western culture although the discipline has of course undergone substantial transformations in the course of history. Unlike Brunovský, who seems to think that the discourse on the life and death of painting is just a theoretical construction, or perhaps even fiction, I would argue that discourse contributes to shaping the reality of painting as an artistic practice. The way we speak about the world, or an aspect of it, determines the way we act in the world, and vice versa. As Salman Rushdie has so aptly put it, "redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it."⁴ The fact that the modern notion of the demise and return of painting is just as persistent as modern painting itself ironically testifies to the interconnection between the practice and discourse of painting. Rather than telling the 'truth' about the state of painting, the discourse of painting reflects *the dynamics* of painting, i.e. its changing practises, functions, aesthetics and politics.

In what follows, I will explore some recent transformations of Western painterly practises. The underlying presumption of my argument is that contemporary painting is not only a field of incessant battles over the essentially self-reflective question of "What is painting?" Over the last decades painting has also become an intermedial laboratory where artists experiment with developing a connective aesthetic in the interface between painting and other media. In my opinion, calling this laboratory of painting 'postmedial' would be missing a crucial point – because this would imply that the issue of medium is irrelevant because we have moved beyond the point where distinctions between media matters. The issue of medium is still central to contemporary painting, or better still the *relations* between media are imperative, both as an issue intrinsic to the discipline itself and as a matter of the relationship between painting and other media.

⁴ RUSHDIE, Salman: „Imaginary Homelands.“ In: RUSHDIE, Salman (ed.): Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981 – 1991. London: Granta Books 1991, p. 14.

The story of how artists of the 1960s and 1970s broke new ground by means of media like the readymade, photography, video, installation, performance and different kinds of mixed media has been told so often that it has almost become a 'myth', that is, it has become an art historical orthodoxy, a naturalised 'truth' of how the age-old demarcation dispute between the fine arts was eventually closed. This myth tells us that the experiments of the 1960s and 1970s moved art into a "post-medium condition"⁵ in which the classical art historical categories have been dissolved, and the modernist discourse on the specificity of disciplines has been overtaken by 'the new media' and their seemingly inexhaustible potential for readjustment, technological updating and generation of new hybrids. Topicality is often believed to be immanent in these media hybrids, irrespective of the subject of the individual artwork, because the material organisation of the hybrid *as hybrid* seems to be a perfect mirror of the hybridisation that characterises the era of globalisation with its connective forces of mass migration and intensified cultural, economical and informational exchange.

This correlation of the new media with topicality, expansion and hybridity is part and parcel of the myth of the victorious new media. In the mythological narrative of how art entered the "post-medium condition", the new artistic media has to conquer an enemy, *painting*. Predictably, the enemy is ascribed the opposite qualities of the heroes: The new media were, and still are, believed to be allied with the future because they assimilate and blend the very latest technologies. Painting, on the other hand, is assumed to be restricted by its simple and old fashioned materials, and it is thought to be inevitably chained to the traditions of the past. Whereas the new media are busy breaking down traditions and strengthening the commitment of art to social and political issues, painting is often regarded as conservative, aloof and absorbed in self-reflection. In the 1960s, it was widely agreed that the cul-de-sac of painting was caused by the Modernist attempts to preserve the discipline from contagion of other cultural forms and restrict its activities to what the formalists regarded as its primary task: to explore the formal aspects of painting on the theory that all painting is basically about painting.⁶

⁵ KRAUSS, Rosalind: „A Voyage on the North Sea.“ IN: *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. London: Thames & Hudson 1999.

⁶ This essay reconfigures elements from previously published material in a new context of Slovak painting specifically and the issue of the relations between centres and peripheries in the Western art world more generally. See: Anne Ring Petersen, "Painting Spaces," *Contemporary Painting in Context*, eds. Anne Ring Petersen et.al., Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010, pp. 123 – 138, Anne

In the 1960s and 1970s, artists and critics generally had much more faith in sculpture although sculpture had, until then, been ranked below painting in the hierarchy of fine arts. During this period radical sculptors reconfigured the work's relationship to the 'site' and to space. They began to treat the materials and structures of the work with an unprecedented freedom which placed sculpture in what Rosalind Krauss has named "the expanded field"⁷ In the late 1970s and the 1980s, a wave of figurative, neo-expressionist painting swept over Europe and the US. Yet, critics such as Hal Foster were quick to dismiss this revival of painting as "the use of kitschy historicist references to commodify the usual painting," that is to say, as a return to tradition that sided with political neo-conservatism and whose principal objective was to increase the turnover of the art market.⁸

It seems that a genuine change of attitude did not occur until the 1990s. It was not a change in the sense that painting reclaimed its historical position as the leading artistic discipline, or the critique of painting ceased. But attention shifted from the limitations of painting to its possibilities when people recognised that painting can function as a flexible medium in keeping with the times and on a par with the new media. The fact that this change of attitude came so late explains why *expanded painting* or *the expanded field of painting* was an under-developed area of art historical scholarship in the 20th century. The change paved the way for a recognition that painting has, at least since the late 1960s, extended its repertoire so much that it has developed from a fairly well-defined discipline into an intermedial and even transmedial field, where 'painting' can merge with media such as photography, video, sculpture, ready-made, installation, performance as well as with design and the cultural forms usually subsumed under the category 'the everyday'.

Today, artists do not limit themselves to painting's traditional materials and means, and they also move beyond the framed surface and its bounded physicality. Artists today are less preoccupied with formal types of demarcation than with investigating 'the painterly' as an effect resulting from the use of colours or the

Ring Petersen, "The Transdisciplinary Potential of Remediated Painting," Column no. 7 (Sydney: Artspace Visual Arts Centre 2011), pp. 8 – 20.

⁷ KRAUSS, Rosalind: „Sculpture in the Expanded Field.“ In: *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, Mass. London: The MIT Press 1987, s. 276 – 290.

⁸ FOSTER, Hal: *Recodings. Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*. Seattle, Washington: Bay Press 1985, p. 122, 124.

modes of construction, representation and display traditionally associated with the discipline of painting.⁹

When contemporary painting is compared to modernist painting, it becomes clear that the range of *content* has also been expanded. It does not only investigate the language and history of painting, but also wider social, ideological and political topics - just like 'the new media'. To identify some of the features that distinguish the painting of today from other media, you therefore have to take a closer look at its *formal* aspects. Generally speaking, the more recent expansion of painting can be described as a *hybridisation*¹⁰ or *remediation*.¹¹ With respect to cultural forms, hybridisation can be defined as "the ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices."¹² With respect to the visual arts, it still makes sense to consider some of the new hybrids as a continuation of the specific traditions of painting instead of seeing them as 'postmedial' art.

There is all the more reason to do so because expansion of painting is not new. It has in fact been the very impetus of modern painting. Every new avant-garde movement wanted to reinvent painting. Until the 1970s, painters usually extended the traditional domain of figurative painting by either exploring *abstraction* or assimilating images from popular culture and the mass media, in other words, by working with and reflecting on the *mediation* of images in modern society.¹³ Both ways of extending the vocabulary of painting have established a long and rich tradition that continues to this day. I want to argue that the major change that has happened within the last two decades is that a remarkable number of painters have begun to explore the possibility of developing painting in a third direction

⁹ WALLENSTEIN, Sven-Olov: „Måleri det utvidgade fältet.“ In: LEVÉN, Ulrika (ed.): *Måleri det utvidgade fältet*. Stockholm, Malmö: Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall and Rooseum, 1996, p. 30.

¹⁰ HARRIS, Jonathan (ed.): *Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting. Hybridity, Hegemony, Historicism*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, Tate Liverpool 2003.

¹¹ BOLTER, Jay David – GRUSIN, Richard: *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1999.

¹² PIETERSE, Jan Nederveen: „Globalisation as Hybridisation.“ In: *International Sociology*, 1994, no. 2, p. 165.

¹³ WEIBEL, Peter: „Pittura/Immedia. Die Malerei in den 90er Jahren zwischen mediatisierter Visualität und Visualität im Kontext.“ In: WEIBEL, Peter (ed.): *Pittura/Immedia*. Klagenfurt: Verlag Ritter 1995, pp. 13 – 26; WEIBEL, Peter: „Pittura/Immedia: Painting in the Nineties between Mediated Visuality and Visuality in Context.“ In: PETERSEN, Anne Ring et al. (ed.): *Contemporary Painting in Context*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 2010, pp. 43 – 64.

and redefining what 'space' is in relation to painting. Today much energy is put into exploring the *spatiality* of painting, not as a product of illusionism but as something physical and tangible. Artists are investigating painting's relations to objects, space, place and 'the everyday', and in doing so they are expanding painting physically as well as conceptually. In many cases one can hardly say that artists paint pictures anymore; they are rather engaged in creating spatial works with distinct painterly properties.

Let us take a closer look at some of the techniques used by artists to transform 'a painting' into a three-dimensional object or a spatial entity and to explore the connections between the work of art and its physical and social contexts. A good place to start is installational exhibitions of paintings. The Danish painter Peter Bonde has often used the techniques of installation art to highlight the interrelations between the individual paintings in an exhibition. At his exhibition at Galerie Brigitte March in Stuttgart in 2000, Bonde placed a large canvas directly on the floor by leaning it against the wall, he hung medium-sized canvases densely on the wall in a syncopated rhythm, and he sent a series of smaller and visually lighter canvases up under the ceiling by placing them on long poles cast in plastic buckets, thereby approximating his paintings to the political boards of a protest demonstration. Because the luminous colour of the buckets matched the orange colour of the paintings, they enhanced the coherence of the display – almost turning the exhibition into a work of art in its own right.

Obviously, Peter Bonde's exhibition does not fit neatly into the category of modern easel painting made for anonymous costumers; neither does it fit into the category of installation art proper, whose target group consists of museums, galleries and rich collectors. Contrary to installation art proper, installational exhibitions of paintings are generally taken apart and the paintings sold separately. In other words, these exhibitions are hotbeds of conflicting interests. As installations they are tailor-made for a specific site, they are ephemeral and practically impossible to sell; as independent easel paintings they are durable, transportable and well-adjusted to the market economy. On top of that, an installational exhibition of paintings has a double appeal to the viewer: It invites the viewer to experience and read it as a spatial environment, an installation with countless cross-references among its elements and a multiplicity of vistas that overturns traditional pictorial perspective. At the same time it also urges the viewer to contemplate and read each painting as an individual image. It goes without saying that this requires a greater effort than the usual oscillation between the details and the whole of a single picture. To conclude, a spatial

installation of paintings turns painting into something more complex, intertextual, contradictory and – last but not least – more *spatial* than we have been used to.

Slovak painter Dorota Sadovská has consistently staged her paintings in ways that are even more radically spatial than that of Bondé's exhibition. With one foot in photography and figurative painting and the other in performance activities, she constantly pushes painting in new directions.¹⁴ She has not only transformed the aesthetic of painting into an intermedial aesthetic by combing painting with photography, video, performance and installation; she has also made it an integral part of her working method to assemble her paintings in situ for specific exhibit areas in a way that transgresses the conventional hanging of paintings by tearing the pictures loose from the wall. Like sculptures and mobiles her paintings conquer space. She has for instance hung her pictures of saints under the ceiling¹⁵ and constructed an oblong tunnel from them.¹⁶ She has cut diagonally through and divided the exhibition space with pictures slanting at a 45° angle,¹⁷ and she has built cubes out of paintings and hung them high, so that they may only be viewed from beneath.¹⁸ It goes without saying that Sadovská's taste for the uncommon point of view blocks old viewing habits and encourages the visitor to engage with her paintings in a more physically demanding manner.

A number of artists have turned to the techniques of installation to reinterpret the genres of landscape, cityscape and cartography. This crossbreeding of installation and traditional pictorial genres provides painters with a productive basis for renegotiating the representation of space. The German painter Franz Ackermann has for instance created complex mental maps of overlapping images by combining easel painting with wall painting, and the British painter Julian Opie has used installation art's spatial distribution of objects to explore the idea of landscape painting as a space that viewers can walk into. The techniques of installation art have also widened the range of expression of artists working with colour effects and non-figurative forms, e.g. German painter Katharina Grosse and American artist Jessica Stockholder. The latter creates assemblages and builds

¹⁴ RUSINOVÁ, Zora: "Dorota Sadovská. Between Painting and Photography." In: *Sado*. Supplement of *Umělec* magazine 2005, pp. 58 – 61.

¹⁵ At Deus ex machine, Consortium Dion, 1999. The following draws on B. Skid: "An Unrewarding Mission," *Sado*. Supplement of *Umělec* magazine 2005, pp. 20 – 26.

¹⁶ At Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick, Ireland 2002.

¹⁷ At Yellow Soul, South Tipperary Arts Centre Clonmel, Ireland 2002.

¹⁸ At Dimension S, Vojtech Löffler Museum, Košice 2000.

huge installations out of everyday objects and building materials. Contrary to most installation artists, e.g. Jason Rodes, who also exploits the colour effects produced by the juxtaposition of different objects, Jessica Stockholder adopts a specifically painterly approach. She often covers the objects partly or entirely with paint, and she combines them with compositional counterparts of pure colour to transform the everyday objects into independent forms. When she puts things together, she places them along diagonals as if she were constructing a linear perspective in a picture, thus stressing the similarity between her three-dimensional construction and the construction of pictorial perspective. Stockholder's works elicit the more bodily and performative type of response typical of installation art. She uses the spatiality of installation art to transfer, or rather translate, painting from plane to space and wrap the work around the viewer as a three-dimensional environment. One could say that she creates a usually temporary stage-like event that gives substance to the dream that illusionistic paintings have always played on: the dream of literally walking into the painting to be able to explore it more thoroughly and empathise deeply with it.

Dorota Sadovská has her own take on this dream. At first glance, her cubes of paintings seem to invite the visitor to walk into the painting, but the illusion is broken the moment one realises that they are hung too high for anyone to 'step inside'. Still, the cubes activate the *dream* even though they shatter the hope of realising it. On the other hand, her light art installations which suffuse the whole room with coloured light seem to fulfil the dream of walking into a painting, at least on a material and sensory level.

Sadovská has also worked across painting and relational aesthetics to engage her audience in a more performative and bodily manner. At the Venice Biennial of 1999, she participated in the project *Slovak Art for Free*. The two Bratislava curators Petra Hanáková and Alexandra Kusá had installed a wall of artist-designed tattoos at the Pavilion of the Slovak and Czech Republic. *Slovak Art for Free* unfolded as a kind of collaborative performance event that involved visitors as social subjects by means of tattooing: volunteers could get a free tattoo of a design created by a Slovak artist and executed by one of the three expert tattoo artists who had agreed to work at the Biennial and give the tattoos for free.¹⁹ The project thus crossed the border between high and low culture and blurred the distinction between public and private display. Sadovská used the opportunity to

¹⁹ BELLUŠOVA, Soňa: „Venice is Marked with Free Slovak Art“. 4 October 1999. In: *The Slovak Spectator*. Online at: <http://spectator.sme.sk/articles/view/3742/9/> (Accessed 9 May 2012).

'install' a couple of her favourite motifs – the saints St. Lucy and St. Sebastian – as permanent paintings on the visitors' bodies, thereby using their skin as canvas and turning their bodies into a mobile support of the image. Here, the suffering and physical pain of the martyrs were paradoxically associated with trendy aesthetics because the tattoos functioned both as a marker of fashion and as a sign of identification. Moreover, they also counted as cultural capital in the art world, where a Sadovská tattoo from the Venice Biennial would be perceived as a token of one's close encounters with transgressive art and participation in one of the world's most prestigious art events.

By combining painting with installation and giving substance to the dream of physically entering a picture, artists like Sadovská, Stockholder, Grosse, Ackermann and Opie produce an ambivalent intensity. This intensity of experience seems to originate in *a tension between two kinds of presence*. On one hand, viewers experience a phenomenological and situational presence related to their direct involvement in the 'here and now' of the work. This involvement directs the viewers' attention to their bodily and performative navigation through the space of the installation. On the other hand, viewers experience a sense of absorption, of being embraced by a fictitious world that introduces other time-space relation, and pushes corporeal gravity and navigation through space to the back of viewers' minds.²⁰ Painterly installations make this conflict between the feeling of loss of self and a heightened awareness of self crowd in on the viewer with a greater intensity than any easel painting, even colour field painting which is usually ascribed the ability to produce an intensified awareness of the phenomenological relations between viewer and work. We can therefore conclude from these examples that installation has been instrumental in moving painting into an expanded field.

So has the engagement with 'the everyday', which has been a vital component of modern art since the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century. The British artist David Batchelor picks up this tradition. He is an artist with a double involvement: On the one hand, he makes interventions in the everyday and engages with a multitude of readymades found in urban environments; on the other, he is deeply engaged in a painterly exploration of colour, especially the monochrome – a cornerstone of modernist painting. The readymade is perhaps

²⁰ BOGH, Mikkel: „Fact as Value, Value as Fact – Some Current Trends in Painting and Sculpture.“ In: BOGH, Mikkel – Brandt, Charlotte (eds.): *Fact & Value: nye positioner i skulptur og maleri/new positions in sculpture and painting*. Copenhagen: Charlottenborg Udstillingsbygning 2000, p. 20.

the most common means of remediation and innovation in modern art. Artists have combined painting and sculpture with readymade elements to refashion these media ever since Picasso made his first collage *Still Life with Chair Caning* in 1912.²¹ In addition, the readymade is a reminder that the artist never starts from a *tabula rasa*; there is always something there already. In Batchelor's case, this 'something' that is always already there is globalised consumer culture. His physical material is often objects that are colourful and luminous in and of themselves. This preference for coloured mass produced artifacts is a token of the interest he takes in the way our experience of colour has been transformed in the past 100 years, primarily through electrification and petrochemicals.²² In 2007, he created the installation *Unplugged* consisting of 23 hairy columns or trees made from thousands of cheap, brightly coloured plastic things bought in pound shops. These plastic clips, toys, cutlery, toilet brushes and feather dusters were all made in China but distributed worldwide thanks to today's global economic exchange.²³ Batchelor's artificial wood of plastic trees pointed to the visual splendour of everyday objects, but also to the almost repulsive garishness and chromatic flatness that surround us all the time in urban environments, and to the aesthetic homogenisation brought about by globalised consumer culture. Batchelor's works reflect on the position and role of 'the painterly' in contemporary culture. He explores how the primary material of painting – colour – is omnipresent in consumer culture and everyday experience where it transcends all disciplinary borders and creates its own symbolic and aesthetic orders.

What do these diverse examples tell us about the expansion and limitations of painting today? They have demonstrated that 'painting' can appear in many different shapes, e.g. the shape of an installation, an object, or a crossover between painting and relational aesthetics. It can be overtly "theatrical", as Michael Fried would call it,²⁴ and it can thus engage the viewer in a more bodily and dynamic manner. But it can also highlight the presence of 'the painterly' in urban environments and consumer culture. The examples also suggest that many artists working with expanded painting have an ambivalent attitude toward painting.

²¹ COLES, Alex: „David Batchelor a Liam Gillick: Monochromes of the Everyday.“ In: *Parachut: Contemporary Art Magazine*, no. 100, 2000, Oct. – Dec., pp. 132 – 139.

²² HOLMAN, Martin: „David Batchelor unplugged.“ In: *Art World*, 2007, no. 1, p. 44.

²³ BARLEY, Nick: „Colour In.“ In: *The List*, 2007, no. 580, unpagged. Online-journal: <http://www.list.co.uk> (Accessed on 17 September 2010).

²⁴ FRIED, Michael: „Art and Objecthood.“ In: BATTCOCK, Gregory (ed.): *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press 1995, pp. 116 – 147.

David Batchelor has summed up the ambiguity of his relationship with painting in a way that seems to me to articulate a common experience:

My relationship with painting is ambivalent. I use the term in its strict sense, which is [...] motivated by [...] a simultaneous attraction to it, and repulsion from it. [...] I work in a studio and my work in studios is certainly informed by painting. Even if my work is mainly three dimensional and some would call it sculpture, but I don't think I would. Painting still informs it more than anything else. I can't get away from painting entirely, at the same time I can't do it.²⁵

As to painterly installations, these monumental works are very dependent on the spaces of museums and galleries as opposed to monumental paintings that have been designed as public art, e.g. murals. Paintings made as public art and the grand fresco decorations of the Renaissance and Baroque integrate painting into a social context. They are placed so that they do not obstruct the normal functions of the room or outdoor space for which they are made. An installation, on the other hand, requires a room of its own, a space that people enter only to experience the installation.

On the face of it, installations based on painting seem to break down the barrier between the painting and its environment, leaving the borders of the work of art wide open, so that social reality can pour into it while the work itself seizes control of the surrounding space. This effect is perhaps most clearly felt in Sadovská's light art project *Luminia* (1997) made for Synagogue, a centre for contemporary art housed in a former synagogue in Trnava. The fact that the viewer physically enters into the work to experience it also seems to give evidence of a free passage between the work and its contexts. However, this fusion of spheres is paradoxical because it opens and closes the work to the surrounding world at one and the same time. The appropriation of techniques of installation enables painting to embrace physical space, but this expansion is usually dependent on a withdrawal into the reclusive spaces of art institutions. From this we can draw the conclusion that the fusion of painting and installation does not automatically entail an opening of painting towards the social and political world,

²⁵ BATCHELOR, David: „GI symposium: Painting as a New Medium. David Batchelor.“ In: *Art & Research*, no. 1, 2006 – 2007, pp. 1 – 7. Online-journal: <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n1/batchelor.html> (Accessed 17 September 2010).

not to mention a critical engagement with social, political and historical reality. Subversion and critique is not something inherent in this medium (or in any medium) and as opposed to other kinds of installation art, it is not obvious for the audience that some of these 'painterly' works could or should be read as art with a critical edge. The majority of viewers are for example probably not aware that Stockholder's aestheticization of everyday objects involves a reflection on the relationship between different economic systems in consumer society.²⁶ It is not that art audiences are ignorant, but contemporary painting is received in a context of new artistic media and strategies whose political and social agenda is made much more explicit. Therefore, most viewers are likely to perceive Stockholder's understated works as 'affirmative art'.

Slovak artist Daniel Fischer's installation *Emergence (The Magnificent Eight, 2009)* presents clear evidence of the critical and political potential of expanded painting. The installation consists of eight mirrored cylinders. Seven of them are placed on semi-circular anamorphic portraits painted in black-and-white and spread out horizontally on the floor. The last cylinder reflects all the others; it captures their reflections and brings them together. As such, the last cylinder stands in for the viewer's body and the viewer's active reflection on the individual components of the installation. The construction of anamorphosis has been used in the history of painting to play tricks with perspective, but Fischer deploys it to construct a visual metaphor of rising historical memories and an emerging critical consciousness.

The installation *Emergence* basically functions as a historical memorial to eight courageous soviet citizens, who on Sunday August 25, 1968 gathered on Red Square in Moscow with banners to protest against the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the army of the Warsaw Pact countries a few days earlier.²⁷ Shortly after, they were arrested by KGB men. After weeks of imprisonment the demonstrators were finally sentenced to several years in exile or labour camps, and two of them were committed to prison psychiatric clinics. As Martin Bútora explained in his speech at the opening of Daniel Fischer's exhibition at the House of Art in Bratislava in 2010:

²⁶ BONDE, Lisbeth: „Rebellen, der blev klassiker (interview). In: *Weekendavisen*, 14. – 20. October 2005, sec. 2:6.

²⁷ GERŽOVÁ, Jana: "Notes on Disharmonic Harmony." In Daniel Fischer: *Emergence (The Magnificent Eight)*. Bratislava: 2010, pp. 57 – 61.

Daniel Fischer [...] bowed to the victims who unmasked the aggressor from inside, in front of his own citizens. [...] We may lead endless quarrels whether the Czechoslovak spring was an illusionary dream or an opportunity to reform the unreformable; what value the spontaneous citizen movement had [...] However, there are also deeds which do not need to be disputed; there are people who knew at the time, what was to be defended; there are reminders, which were made by others and elsewhere, on our behalf.²⁸

At first glance the distorted portraits of Fischer's canvasses could be mistaken for abstract paintings. They are reminiscent of maelstroms rather than humans, victims bulldozed by tanks rather than glorious heroes. Only when looking at the reflection in the mirrored cylinder that rises above each painting does the viewer perceive an approximation of a human face. It is important to notice that Fischer's visual reminders constitute a *suggestive* commemoration. He does not spell things out in the manner of a political speech. Nevertheless, as Jana Geržová has pointed out, the aesthetic of the installation and Fischer's subtle use of the traditions of painting, perspective and mirrors convey a moral stance on political history and declares the artist's ethical attitude to painting.²⁹

When encountering works by such gifted artists as Sadovská and Fischer, one wonders why the end of the Cold War with its geopolitical division of Europe into East and West has not resulted in a fuller integration of Slovak art into the Western art world and art history.³⁰ Sadovská and Fischer are clearly exploring issues such as gender, body politics, political reality and traumatic memory, which are also central to advanced art in the West. Moreover, decades of persistent postcolonial critique of Western exclusion of non-Western artists have eventually resulted in the Western art system becoming considerably more inclusive and diverse than it was before 1990. A growing number of non-Western artists have now made international careers in what is increasingly becoming a multi-centred *global* art world. So, why have Slovak artists not really profited from this change of policies in Western art institutions and art historical scholarship?

As I have only little knowledge of Slovak art, I am not in a position to evaluate the quality of art in Slovakia or analyse the Slovak art scene. Instead, I will

²⁸ BÚTORA, Martin: "Daniel Fischer on How to Speak about Things, which One Should not Keep Quiet about." In: *Daniel Fischer: Emergence (The Magnificent Eight)*. Bratislava 2010, pp. 33 – 34.

²⁹ GERŽOVÁ, Jana: "Notes on Disharmonic Harmony," pp. 57 – 58.

³⁰ Cf. Jana Geržová's proposal for the symposium *Painting in the Postmedial Age*.

approach the general issue of recognition and integration from the skewed perspective of an art historian from Scandinavia, i.e. from the Northern periphery of the so-called Western art world. I will however borrow my peripheral perspective from a perceptive art historian from Asia, which has for centuries been regarded by Europeans as an 'imitative' periphery whose artists were destined to follow the lead of Western artists if they were to become truly *modern* artists. As Asia is now well on its way to becoming the global centre of economic and artistic activities in the 21st century, there has been a significant shift in the nature and reception of Asian contemporary art, and critical thinkers have begun to reposition the art of this region, leading to the emergence of the distinct field of art historical inquiry called Asian contemporary art.³¹

In her article "Biennials Without Borders?" from 2009, Taiwanese art historian Chin-tao Wu sheds new light on the question of artistic representation at big international gatherings such as biennials by analysing the national statistics that underpin the marketing of biennials as transnational, e.g. when the 2006 Singapore Biennial boasted of "95 artists from over 38 countries".³² Wu's primary object of investigation is the nine Documenta exhibitions held between 1968 and 2007. She examines the artists' country of birth, their country of residency, and the relation between the two, and she uses typical regional categories: North America, Latin America, Asia, Africa and Oceania. Of special interest in our context is the fact that Wu divides Europe into two, and her reason for doing so:

For despite EU enlargement, there are still two Europes in contemporary art practice: one comprises Germany, Italy, Britain, France, Switzerland, Austria, and to a lesser degree Holland, Belgium and Spain, which supply the majority of European art figures – 'Europe A'. The remaining countries, whose artists appear only sporadically at international events form what I call 'Europe B'.³³

Chin-tao Wu gives a name to the *internal* hegemony and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that structure European contemporary art. She thus points to

³¹ CHIU, Melissa – GENOCCHIO, Benjamin: „Introduction: What is Asian Contemporary Art?“ In: CHIU, Melissa – GENOCCHIO, Benjamin (eds.): *Contemporary Art in Asia: a Critical Reader*. Cambridge, Mass., London: The MIT Press 2011, p. 5.

³² WU, Chin-Tao: „Biennials Without Borders?“ In: *New Left Review*, 2009, no. 57, p. 109.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 110.

a powerful hierarchy that is often overlooked, not least in the universalising postcolonial critiques of eurocentrism in the Western art world: artists living and working in old and new EU countries do not automatically hold a position of advantage and privilege that secures access to the magic circle of recognition, distinctions, fame and art historical canonisation. There are real barriers especially for artists from 'Europe B', to which both Slovakia and the Scandinavian countries belong.³⁴

I started my paper by quoting two artists on the notion of painting as a battle fought either between artists or between practitioners and theorists. Chin-tao Wu's investigation of biennials adds another dimension to this notion of the battlefield: to create paintings is also to fight for recognition. Many contemporary artists consider recognition from the big institutions and collectors in the US and 'Europe A' to be the greatest recognition one can get. As the so-called Western art world is being reconfigured as a global art world, and as new vibrant art scenes, powerful institutions and wealthy collectors outside the West are consolidating their position, this Western hegemony increasingly looks like a declining world order. Only the future can tell whether the metropolitan centres that artists from peripheral countries will henceforth be drawn to will be Eastern rather than Western.

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³⁴ In effect, Documenta 12 in 2007 included only one Slovak artist, Mária Bartuszová, but on the other hand three artists from the Czech Republic (Běla Kolářová, Jiří Kovanda and Kateřina Šedá). The fact that only two Danish artists were included (Paul Gernes and Katya Sander, the latter only as contributor to the collaborative video project "9 Scripts from A Nation at War", cf. the Documenta 12 catalogue) reveals that the division is not so much between the former Eastern and Western European states, but between 'Europe A' and 'Europe B' as described by Wu.

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