

BOOK REVIEWS

# “Ostkunst, a Different yet Similar Art”: Some Notes on the Complexity of Tomáš Štrauss’s Thought

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**TOMÁŠ ŠTRAUSS: BEYOND THE GREAT DIVIDE – ESSAYS ON EUROPEAN AVANT GARDES FROM EAST TO WEST, DANIEL GRŮŇ, HENRY MEYRIC HUGHES, JEAN-MARC POINSOT (EDS.), (PARIS: AICA PRESS, 2020), 189 PP.**

“As in the case of these mysterious correlations, the dividing line that separates various conceptions of art and culture not only runs straight through Europe and other continents but also straight through specific cities (...) At the same time, the radical redivision of Europe and the world in Yalta in 1945 did not necessarily have to have a direct impact on cultural history – the borders between art forms do not blindly follow the often arbitrarily drawn political borders that divide the great powers.” (p. 177) This statement by Slovak art critic Tomáš Štrauss refers to his own experiences and knowledge,

as an art historian, critic and curator. The long-awaited anthology *Tomáš Štrauss. Beyond the Great Divide. Essays on European Avant Gardes from East to West* aims to present Štrauss's wide ranging complex thinking, which was not designed to find easy answers. His understanding of art was based on viewing it from many angles, and on applying interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary access to it. In its understanding of art history and genealogy, Štrauss's approach converged with the perspective of Hungarian composer Bela Bartók, who lived in Bratislava. "The territory of Central and Eastern Europe," Bartók wrote concerning the folk art in the former Hungarian empire, "is characterised by rich diversity (...). A comparative look at this region reveals a boundless selection and borrowing of melodies, individual motifs, and broader conceptual structures and innovations, a process continuing over centuries and still ongoing today." (p. 28) As Daniel Grúň points out in his introduction to the anthology, like Bartók—whom he valued highly—Štrauss considered Central Europe as a dynamic whole, emphasizing its specific features, traditions, and cultural trajectories. The key concept in his theoretical-critical work is the idea of plurality and tolerance. This approach, which emphasizes a historical topography, expands on the nationally and ethnically defined units of art history and considers their cultural-historical, sociological, and psychological aspects. (p. 22)

Štrauss's open spirit was also the reason why he became a confidant for alternative and unofficial artists who found in him someone who accepted their non-conventional views and unorthodox artistic practices. However, Štrauss's Marxist philosophical background, attained during his studies in Prague, underwent a transformation in the middle of the 1960s. Due to the brutal repression of the so-called "socialism with a human face" by the armies of the Warsaw Pact in Czechoslovakia in August 1968, he became a persona non grata at Bratislava's Comenius University, where he was employed at the Institute of Aesthetics. In the 1960s, Štrauss was regarded as a "revisionist," and his kind of "revision" of communist dogma was not welcome. Štrauss looked at socialism as a theory that was by nature open, and that could not be otherwise because the main focus of its analysis, capitalist

society, was itself dynamic and open.(1) Consequently, Štrauss in his turn regarded the servants of the socialist regime as “revisionists.”(2) In his opinion, they brought down the original Marxist idea to a point where Marxism shared certain traits with totalitarian dictatorship, the opposite of its original intention. Therefore, especially after his emigration from socialist Czechoslovakia to West Germany, Štrauss became an important person of reference and mediator for the Eastern and the Western European artscenes, an intellectual who was able to take positions that went beyond cold war polarities.(3)

*Tomáš Štrauss. Beyond the Great Divide. Essays on European Avant Gardes from East to West* appears as the third in an ongoing series published by AICA, entitled *Art Critics of The World*, which aims to offer to the widest possible readership texts by original critics who best represent their countries, and who are not yet as internationally known. An anthology of texts by Tomáš Štrauss that until now had been published only in Slovak or German, is certainly a great way to deepen contemporary debates on the intersection of art discourses in East and West, and on their implications for a broader for social and cultural field.

This complexity of Štrauss’s thinking extends to his own family history and its memory. He was born in Budapest in 1931, lived most of his life in Košice and Bratislava in the former Czechoslovakia (now Slovakia), emigrated to West Germany, and returned to Bratislava twelve years later—after the Velvet Revolution—where he died in 2013. His most momentous publication is *The Slovak Variant of Modernity*, a book he wrote in 1978-79 and which at the time could only be disseminated in samizdat.(4) Together with Radislav Matušík’s *Before. Crossing the Boundaries: 1964-1971*(5) (1981) Štrauss’s book is the most important publication on the alternative and unofficial art scenes in Slovakia during the cold war, and is required reading for anyone who hopes to examine and analyze non-conformist art under communist rule in the former ČSSR.

The collection consists of seven essays selected by the book’s editors, Daniel

Grůň, Henry Mayric Hughes, and Jean Marc Poinsoť. The first, “Allegro Barbaro: Béla Bartók, Ethnography, Music and Visual Art” was originally published in 1981 in the exhibition catalogue *Allegro Barbaro: Béla Bertók und die bildende Kunst* by the Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum in Duisburg, Germany. At that time Štrauss had only just emigrated to Western Germany, where he became a curator at the Lehmbruck museum. Béla Bartók, together with Leoš Janáček and Eugen Suchoň, belonged to a group of composers who took inspiration from folk music and used such sources in their own works. Štrauss’s understanding of the cultural field of Central and Southeastern Europe corresponds with Bartók’s own method of research, which the composer referred to as “comparative musical folklore.” Like Bartók, Štrauss understood the cultural field as something steeped in local traditions, and in a process of vivid mutual exchange between neighboring regions.

In another essay in the collection, “Lajos Kassák: Central European Roots and the Problematic of Constructivism,” Štrauss scrutinizes the conditions for the emergence of the important Hungarian avant-gardist’s artistic program, beginning in 1916 when he started publishing in the magazine *Ma*. Strauss appreciated and reflected Kassák as writer and artist, and also as editor of diverse avantgarde magazines that built bridges and opened information channels between the Hungarian and the international avant-garde. He positioned Kassák inside the context of the European avantgarde, including such figures as Marinetti, Malevitch, Mondrian, Duchamp or Moholy-Nagy. In a polemic with György Bálint, Kassák had substantively addressed the function and essence of socialism. The real value of the political struggle of the working class, Kassák had argued, “lies not in the movement in and of itself, but in its liberation of the personality from all firmly bound collective necessities and given circumstances. Without this dominant and constantly expanding element of humanism, any coming revolution is inevitably simply an end in itself, and likely to prove harmful.” (p. 50)

Štrauss was very interested in a phenomenon referred to in Slovak art historiography as Košice modernism, comprising artists such as Konštantín Kővári-Kačmarik, Eugen Krón, Konštantín Bauer, and František Foltýn, all of

whom developed innovative avant-garde concepts. Especially the drawing and printing courses run by Eugen Krón, a key figure of the Košice art scene since 1921, became a vibrant center for the development of new ideas and the intensive quest of individual expression. It is in the essay entitled “Kosice XX: From Expressionism to Abstraction” that Štrauss introduces the main protagonists of Košice modernism during the 1920s, Anton Jasusch. Originally written as an introductory text for the exhibition of Slovak modern art in Prague in 1996, in this text, Štrauss reads Košice as a town that “stood on the borders between revolutionary Russia, Poland, Hungary and the ... centers of Western Europe [and that] was particularly enlivened by an unprecedented intellectual ferment at the beginning of the 1920s, following the consolidation of the so-called White Terror regime in Budapest, which avenged itself on avant-garde artists and intellectuals for their sympathies with the Soviet Republic.” (p. 64)

The hefty “Three Model Situations of Contemporary Art Actions” was originally included in the above-mentioned samizdat publication *The Slovak Variant of Modernism* (1978-79) and later republished, in English, by the De Appel gallery in Amsterdam.<sup>(6)</sup> Štrauss’s goal in this text was to undertake the first-ever attempt to analyse and classify the Slovak performative art practices that emerged with vigor on the domestic art scene during the 1960s and 1970s, but that had up to then not found any theoretical examination or reflection. Developing a tripartite model for his analysis, Štrauss defines his first model as “art as closed (total) action.” As illustrations for what he has in mind, Štrauss turns to the happenings organized by the well-known Slovak artist Alex Mlynárčik who cooperated with other artists for most of his projects. Štrauss’s objective overall is to find an answer to the crucial question regarding the nature of action art: “In view of the extensive and costly preparations and the inevitable difficulties that arise in realising even the most carefully preplanned event, one is compelled to ask whether a simple camera would not be sufficient to reveal, in a supplementary act of interpretation, the critical meaning of the events taking place around us. The response to this question is not straightforward. ‘Actual’ reality is unfiltered,

unclear and inexpressive, and thus not easily legible.” (p. 77)

Štrauss’s second model is described by Štrauss himself as “art as open action.” According to him, in this kind of performance, the participants have a broader range of possibilities to create their own ideas and realize their own individual events. A performance based on this model was created, for instance, by Július Koller when he installed a ping pong table in the Young Artists’ Gallery in Bratislava’s old town where he then proceeded to play with the audience. As Štrauss writes, “art – in this conception – is no longer a filtration of life, but rather a parallel or complementary activity. Between the two traditional counterpoles (art and life), a special intermediate sphere opens up. This can take the form of a game.” (p. 82) Further on in the article Štrauss mentions the breeding of pigeons by Peter Bartoš, who pursued this activity both as a hobby and as an art project.

Finally, the third model in Štrauss’s trias are actions “with a displaced meaning.” Here Štrauss proposes that the structure of a performance piece may not only be provided by the artist’s intentions, semantics, aesthetics, or morphology, but also by a work’s concrete realization in time and space, and by its reception. By way of an example Štrauss mentions the project *Pictures for the National Gallery* by Vladimír Popovič, conceived in 1968 as a plan for the process of creating and showing his paintings in the most important official gallery in the country. The third model finally concerns what Štrauss calls an “open aesthetic event, which points beyond and outside itself, an intermediate stratum between art and directly (unintentionally) experienced existence. One variant of this model can be the critical unmasking of the aesthetic essence of art itself (auto-destruction, anti-art).” (p. 87)

The weighty essay “Conceptual Art as an Analysis of the Medium and the Model of Reality (Notes on the Development of Art 1970-1975)” was originally published in samizdat in 1978-79. It reflects on recent non-official artistic tendencies and expressions, with a focus on painting as a practice with a distinctive “intellectual impact.” In this text, Štrauss considers Július Koller as an artist who spearheaded a new approach to painting, and also mentions

in this context the stepping-stone of conceptual art in Slovakia, Koller's painting *Sea (More, 1964)*. According to Štrauss, Koller programmatically and continuously developed new ways of thinking about painting and its function, calling it a "permanent activity." Štrauss further analyzes conceptual tendencies in the work of Jozef Jankovič, with a focus on Jankovič's analytical graphic works from the 1970s, the time when the artist began to be persecuted and was prohibited from exhibiting in public.

An art project that was of special importance to Štrauss was the legendary *White Space in a White Space* which was created in 1977 by Slovak neo-avant-garde artists Stano Filko, Miloš Laky and Ján Zavarský.<sup>(7)</sup> Created in 1974 and exhibited secretly at the official *Dom umenia* in Brno for only one night, this project developed ideas of dematerialisation and transcendence. Štrauss, who was familiar with the artists and witnessed the development of their project, wrote his theoretical reflections in parallel with the finalization of the project. Until today, *White Space in a White Space* represents one of the pivotal Slovak art works of the era, especially in the way it demonstrates opposition to "real existing socialism" as opposed to true Marxism.

In "Ostkunst – but with a Question Mark, a Developmental Sketch of a Different Yet Similar Art"<sup>(8)</sup> Štrauss turns his attention to the artificial division between East and West, and makes an attempt to reassess the dominant view of art in the beginning of the 1980s in West Germany. The text was published on the occasion of the large exhibition *Westkunst*:

*Contemporary Art from 1939*<sup>(9)</sup> that took place in 1981 in the halls of the famous Cologne fair. Štrauss sharply criticizes the show for its focus on Western art ("*Westkunst*") which as a concept still marks an important point of reference in history and exhibiting practice today. *Westkunst* was curated by Klaus Ruhrberg—who was at that time the director of the Museum Ludwig in Cologne—in cooperation with the founder of *Skulptur Projekte Münster*, Kasper König, and László Glozer. In his text, Štrauss polemicizes with the view that the avant-garde is the exclusive product of the "free" Western world.

As he argues somewhat sarcastically, what lies beyond the United States or, in

Europe, to the East of Lüneburg is permanently excluded from the avant-garde. (p. 167) He further points out that all too often, the work of artists is deprived of its geographic and cultural-philosophical context and is instead interpreted through the lense of the political divisions of our globe, even if these took hold only much later in time. Illustrating his point, Štrauss points out that at the end of the 1930s, Germany for one belonged to what the Westkunst organizers considered to be Western art only in a limited way. And ever since 1949-50, Štrauss argues, it has been possible to talk with equal justification of “Ostkunst” as a real alternative to “Westkunst,” suggesting that the borders between these two regions are fluid. The foundation of Štrauss’s complex view of the development of the avantgarde goes beyond the East/West binary, and the same complexity guides him in his assessment of the development of individual artists: “The decision to classify an artist as a realist or, on the contrary, as an anti-realist, a formalist, or an avantgardist is often based not only on criteria of style but also on numerous extra-aesthetic factors, such as the artist’s ability to conform, his cleverness and his opportunism; moreover, it also often simply comes down to a more or less fortunate shaping of human destiny under otherwise obscure external circumstances.” (p. 172)

An exhibition concept that works as an alternative to the Westkunst show of 1981 is the focus of the last essay in the collection, entitled “Art in Eastern Europe: A Phenomenological Model.”(10.) Originally, this text was presented at a conference entitled *European Art with Particular Attention to the Art of the East European Countries*, held in 1988 in Cologne. Štrauss, in an argument reminiscent of what Czech writer Milan Kundera proposes in his well-known essay “A Kidnapped West or Culture Bows Out,” usefully points to the fact that the so-called “Western avant-garde” would be unthinkable without the contributions of Eastern European artists, much like during the 17th and 18th century, Eastern and Western Europe had more or less convergent historical trajectories.(11) The separation between East and West that dominated the Cold War era, after all, only arose after World War II.

This impressive and long-awaited anthology makes a substantive

contribution to the field of art history and criticism within and beyond East and West. From now on, at least part of Tomáš Štrauss's rich oeuvre will be accessible in English. And there are yet more crucial texts, written by the critic after he moved back to Bratislava, that are awaiting their translation in the future.



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## FOOTNOTES

1. Tomáš Štrauss, *Tri otázniky. Od päťdesiatych k osemdesiatym rokom* [Three questionmarks. From the 1950s to the 1980s], (Bratislava: H&H), p. 15. [\[back\]](#)
2. "I could not understand at all how it was possible that they transformed one of the intellectually most ambitious sophisticated philosophical systems of the 19th century into such primitive and illustrative art without any spirit or form." Ibid., p. 10. [\[back\]](#)
3. During the time of his emigration, Štrauss maintained correspondence with various representatives of the Slovak and Czech unofficial art scene. He published a selection of the letters in Tomáš Štrauss, *Utajená korešpondencia* [*Secret Correspondence*] (Bratislava: Kalligram 1999). [\[back\]](#)
4. Tomáš Štrauss, *Slovenský variant moderny* [*The Slovak Variant of Modernity*], (Bratislava: Pallas, 1996). [\[back\]](#)
5. Radislav Matuščík, *...Predtým. Prekročenie hraníc, 1964-1971* (Bratislava, samizdat, 1983)

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6. Tomáš Štrauss, "Three Model situations of Contemporary Art Actions," in: *Works and Words: International Art Manifestation Amsterdam*, exh. cat. De Appel Amsterdam 1980, pp. 70-75.

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7. Lászlo Beke, Tomáš Štrauss, Jiří Valoch, S. Filko – M. Laky – J. Zavorský. Budapest, Fiatal Művészek Klubja, 29.4. 1977. [\[back\]](#)

8. *Ostkunst – nur mit Fragezeichen: Entwicklungsskizze einer anderen und trotzdem gleichen Kunst*, in: *Das Kunstwerk* 38/2, Stuttgart: 1985, pp. 5-6 and 30-32. [\[back\]](#)

9. Laszlo Glozer, *Westkunst: zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939* (Exhib. cat., Museum der Stadt Köln, Köln: DuMont Buchverlag 1981). [\[back\]](#)

10. Thomas Strauss, *Zwischen Ostkunst und Westkunst. Von der Avantgarde zur Postmoderne*. Munich: Scaneg 1995, pp. 13-31 [\[back\]](#)

11. Milan Kundera, *Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l'Europe centrale* [The kidnapped West], *Le Débat*, Volume 27, Issue 5, 1983, pp. 3-23. [\[back\]](#)

