

# POSTMODERNISM AND THE POST-SOCIALIST CONDITION: 15 YEARS AFTER (2003-2018)

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## A B S T R A C T

The author sketches the concept of the “post-socialist” (or “third generation”) avant-garde movements. He explains the historical and political conditions which made the emergence of this specific avant-garde art possible. In his opinion, a unique type of art appeared in socialist countries during the disintegration of Soviet-type socialism due to similar circumstances. Once the global and local political conditions have changed, this art has mostly disappeared, leaving behind only traces of its existence. The author then points out the specific representational mechanisms employed by such art and argues that it should be recognised as yet another kind of the twentieth-century avant-garde art.

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## KEY WORDS

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In 1991, I co-authored a book entitled *Ljubljana, Ljubljana: The Eighties in Slovene Art and Culture*. Its purpose was to present the enormous artistic, cultural and political changes in Slovenia and Ljubljana in the 1980s which then led to Slovenian break with the rest of Yugoslavia and to the Slovenian independence (1991). The main features of these changes were the transformation of Slovenia from an industrial into a postindustrial society, the new dominance of urban and postmodern culture, art and ideas, and an increased communication and exchange with the international environment.

I spent the year of 1993/94 in Berkeley, California. I brought with me the English edition of the *Ljubljana, Ljubljana* book and showed it to some of my colleagues. One of them drew my attention to an article in the *New York Times* Literary Supplement that was devoted to the contemporary Chinese art and which turned out to strongly resemble the art presented in the *Ljubljana, Ljubljana* book.

After returning to Slovenia I started to explore recent and contemporary visual art of various former or present socialist countries. I discovered that in most of them at the time of the disintegration of socialism a specific type of (mostly visual) art emerged which then mostly disappeared with the arrival of parliamentary democracy in those countries. Through research and travels that I then carried on for the next five years, I established the fact that such art strongly resembled the concurrent western postmodernism but that it also contained unique features such as strong politicisation, overt use of ideological and political imagery and symbols, and a specific kind of irony which profoundly differed from the modernist dissident artistic approaches. Such art came into existence in Russia, the ex-Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Cuba, and China. In July 2003, the book entitled *Postmodernism and the Post-socialist Condition*, edited by me and containing chapters by Boris Groys (Russia), Miško Šuvaković (East and Central Europe), Péter György (Hungary), Gerardo Mosquera (Cuba), Gao Minglu (China), and myself – I wrote on Slovenia – was published by The University of California Press in Berkeley.<sup>1</sup>

When asked to explain how it was possible that similar art emerged in countries as different as Slovenia and Cuba or Hungary and China, my response was that such art emerged because it shared similar conditions of possibility. The main features of this art were: the overt use of political imagery; the employment of postmodern techniques and procedures; a specific type of political critique, related to parody and irony; the introduction of national artistic and cultural heritage; eclecticism; mimicry of avant-garde art but under post- or trans-avant-garde conditions. Another feature, although not typical for all the art discussed here but mainly for that of Russia, China and Cuba, was the equivalence established between western consumer ideology and socialist political ideology.

The Russian artist Erik Bulatov thus claimed that there exists a symmetry between the US as the paradigmatic capitalist country and the Soviet system: in both ideology is omnipresent – market ideology in the first and political ideology in the second.

The main artists mentioned in this brief sketch are Komar & Melamid, Erik Bulatov (Russia), Milan Kunc (the Czech Republic), Sándor Pinczehelyi (Hungary), Mladen Stilinović (Croatia), the subREAL group (Romania), the Neue Slowenische Kunst organisation (NSK; Slovenia), the Cuban “Generation of the Eighties, and Wang Guangyi and other artists from the 1989 *China / Avant-Garde* exhibition.

Postmodernism is a key term in my discussion of specific art forms and trends in post-socialist countries. By post-socialism I designate the period defined more by a lack of descriptions than by a firm conceptual designation. What happened in European socialist countries in 1970s and 1980s was a slow and initially almost imperceptible crack in their social and political fabric. In the huge, vast and centrally controlled Soviet Union this process began in the early seventies and continued in the eighties under Mikhail Gorbachov. It ended in the late eighties when social changes were not only experienced in everyday life, but also officially and politically sanctioned. Such a process, although much accelerated, occurred in the eighties in countries ranging from Czechoslovakia and Poland, to Hungary and Slovenia, with the few still existing exceptions relevant for our topic (Cuba and, with reservations, China) tackling the problem of determining the specific features of their brand of socialism and communism.

I am mentioning these well-known facts and issues to highlight that countries such as Soviet Union, the former Soviet bloc countries of Europe, Yugoslavia, and even China and Cuba, in spite of existing on three different continents, possessing different histories, cultures, and mutual relations (or, rather, in the period of late socialism an increasing lack thereof), nonetheless possessed certain common features, one of them often also being the art that emerged at the time of the disintegration of their previous political and social systems. This art strongly resembled that of the early twentieth-century avant-gardes and was frequently also designated by that name. If at the end of the previous millennium many of these countries shared very similar problems such as a crisis of values, commercialisation, and a resurgence of sympathy for the former political system, it may also be warranted to claim something else: that since at that historical point which in these countries marks the beginning of their “transition” into capitalism these countries also possessed a similar cultural and ideological legacy, from which emerged similar kinds of post-utopian artistic endeavors.

During this relatively short period, which in some countries was limited to a decade and more, in others to a few years, artists and their works, a little like at the time of the October Revolution, Paris of 1968, or the late sixties in the United States, sometimes played a crucial and visible social and political role.

The most sublime image that emerged in the political upheavals of the last years – and the term ‘sublime’ is to be conceived here in the strictest Kantian sense – was undoubtedly the unique picture from the time of the violent overthrow of [the president] Ceaușescu in Romania: the rebels waving the national flag with the red star, the Communist symbol, cut out, so that instead of the symbol standing for the organising principle of the national life, there was nothing but a hole in its center. [... T] he masses who poured into the streets of Bucharest ‘experienced’ the situation as ‘open,’ [...] they participated in the unique intermediate state of passage from one discourse (social link) to another, when, for a brief, passing moment, the hole in the big Other, the symbolic order, became visible.<sup>2</sup>

The five main features of the art under discussion were: (a) conceptualism; (b) use of postmodernist techniques and procedures; (c) profuse use of socialist and communist imagery; (d) use of national heritage and of folk, traditional and mass culture; and (e) frequent use of what I designate as the “binary” artistic approach and what others have called “overidentification.” This list is neither exhaustive, nor do we find all the listed features manifested in all the art under consideration.

Historically speaking, the majority of artists under consideration started as conceptual artists and many have remained that until today: Sándor Pinczehelyi from Pécs in Hungary (born 1939) or Mladen Stilinović (born 1947) from Zagreb (Croatia), for example. Others, such as the Slovenian group Irwin or the Romanian group subREAL have exhibited works and carried out performances which could legitimately be called conceptual. The same holds true of post-1979 Chinese artists. Much of the Russian art under consideration has also often been called conceptual, especially in the eighties.

What is typical for most of these groups, individuals and works is the literal use of socialist imagery and of its ideological discourse. These artists and authors didn’t utilise the usual “dissident” procedure of poetically or metaphorically criticising the extant social and ideological reality, they didn’t utilise “Aesopian” language to express in a veiled form their personal views, political opinions and criticisms that cannot be enunciated in the political realm. They use *a*

*completely different artistic device* and it is in this respect that they differ from previous Russian authors and artists, be they from pre-Soviet or Soviet times. Curiously enough, we find the very same procedure used in many different late socialist countries, these ranging from Hungary, Romania and Slovenia to Cuba, with these authors or artists often having little or no knowledge of the works of the others. A good and early example of an artist employing the procedure of articulating a *secondary discourse* on the basis of the primary ideological discourse – but in the realm of painting – is the Hungarian artist Sándor Pinczehelyi. (Fig. 1)

In a simple black and white photograph “the artist keeps real objects, a real hammer and a real sickle in his hands, and strains the known political symbols to his body. [...] Pinczehelyi abolishes the symbol – by means of tautology – as he makes the abstract concept a concrete object. [...] Tautology completes the process of defetishisation: the sickle is nothing else than an ordinary sickle, the hammer is nothing else than an ordinary hammer.”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, what the Hungarian artist here does is “show the object itself,” reveals the *meaningless materiality of the object which in the seventies representationally still functioned only in its symbolical emanation*.

By doing this Pinczehelyi engendered one of the early postmodern works, for postmodernism “consists not in demonstrating that the game works without an object, that the play is set in motion by a central absence, but rather in displaying the object directly, allowing it to make visible its own indifferent and arbitrary character. The same object can function successively as a disgusting reject and as a sublime, charismatic apparition: the difference, strictly structural, does not pertain to the ‘effective properties’ of the object, but only to its place in the symbolic order.”<sup>4</sup>



Figure 1. Sándor Pinczehelyi, “Hammer and Sickle,” 1973, b/w photograph.



Figure 2. Erik Bulatov, “Glory to the USSR,” 1975, oil on canvas, 220 x 220 cm.

A procedure very similar to that of Pinczehelyi can be discerned in the paintings of Carlos Rodríguez Cárdenas (born 1962), who belongs to the “Second” or postmodern generation of Cuban artists. In his work “To Build the Sky” we see precisely what its title denotes: a wall of blue bricks, rising above the green rolling hills, thus visually depicting an ideological phrase or slogan. We are confronted with a materialisation of the enunciated words. The metaphor is here, as in the case of Pinczehelyi’s hammer and sickle, taken seriously – literally. As a Cuban art critic observes, the artist “concentrates on appropriating the stereotyped slogans that inundate Cuban life, and placing them in new semantic settings by means of a process of ironic deconstruction.”<sup>25</sup>

In the works of the Russian artist Erik Bulatov’s slogans intrude upon the inner subjective reality which is, in the artist’s view, the authentic reality. (Fig. 2). They represent the unavoidable reality of political ideology which permeates all socialist existence. As when Lenin claims in his essay “*What Is To Be Done?*” that there is no space without ideology, i.e., ideology is *either* socialist *or* bourgeois, similarly Bulatov’s paintings, those of the Chinese Wang Guangyi (Fig. 3), or of the Czech painter Milan Kunc (Fig. 4) imply that the symbolic universes of capitalism and socialism function according to a similar economy of the sign.

In its most easily recognisable form postmodernism in late socialist countries appeared as a simple transposition and appropriation of Western or First World postmodernism. It furthermore also existed in its more local or specific, namely politicised form. What we therefore unquestionably encounter in socialist countries is the profuse use of postmodernist *techniques and procedures*. Quite often artists or critics designate art which results from them by the name of postmodernism as well.



Figure 3. Wang Guangyi, “Great Castigation Series: Coca Cola,” 1993, oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm.



Figure 4. Milan Kunc, “Consumerists of the World, Unite!” 1978, b/w photograph (in the form of a postcard).

The most obvious feature of art under discussion is the exuberant use of communist and socialist imagery. In modernism, culture and art in the European socialist countries were divided into the official ones and those called the unofficial, dissident, critical, etc. Within this modernist framework the ideological symbols or slogans, for example, would either occur only in a satirical context or their presence would be perceived as proof that the artist who employed them in his work himself succumbed to political propaganda. As the well-known Hungarian modernist painter Imre Bak said to me in 1995, “art, if it is to remain art, should never have a political function.”

The art I am discussing here carries out a different agenda: it uses political slogans and statements, the visual depiction thereof included, official portraits, symbols and icons in an infinite number of ways, and eclectically mixes them. Aleksandr Kosolapov, for example, in his painting “A Malevich Page” (1986), creates a copy of the well-known socialist realist picture “Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin” (1938) by Aleksandr Gerasimov, with the word “Malevich” executed in the manner of the Marlboro logotype, superimposed on the three-dimensional painting. The same device is employed in numerous Chinese works from the early nineties on.

In the paintings and installations by Kosolapov, in many works by Komar & Melamid, in certain works by Sándor Pinczehelyi, those of Cuban artists such as Flavio Garcíandía or René Francisco, or in Chinese Political Pop and Rouge Cynicism, the aim is playful. Russian Sots Art especially, inaugurated by Komar & Melamid in 1972 and overtly related to Soviet socialist realism and American Pop Art, aims at amusing, not spiritually heightening our awareness as is the case with Erik Bulatov, Ilya Kabakov or Oleg Vassilev.

In 1981 Sándor Pinczehelyi painted three peppers red, white and green – in the Hungarian national colors. By the act of painting the Hungarian tricolor on these and similar objects, the artist expressed a symbolic national ownership over them. The gesture was, of course, ironical, but it nonetheless expressed the perceptive observation that the national components of the lived world were becoming increasingly important and were replacing the previous universal and transnational symbols of the hammer and sickle which, in Pinczehelyi’s photograph from 1973, were devoid of any national appropriation. Similar gestures are those of Russian or Chinese artists – Xu Bing, for example – using their national alphabets, appropriating in such a narrative manner the motifs and at the same time exhibiting their “Russian” or “Chinese” nationality.

In 1919-1920 the Russian avant-garde artist El Lissitzky made the “Street Poster” which reads: “Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge.” The work itself was intended for political propaganda (the red wedge being the Red Army and the Whites the counter-revolutionaries). But why is it possible that this poster even today carries such an impact? Why is it that its simple graphisms convey an excess of signification and why does this work allow us to view it as *a pure ideological statement*, on the one hand, *and as a pure aesthetic object*, on the other, with the two never meeting in a single space, for this would destroy the perception and reception of each of them? The reason is that the image and the narrative exist in two distinct spaces; they intersect only, producing in our perception not a unified, but a double or parallel effect.

It is this effect which strongly resembles that achieved by numerous late socialist artists. This procedure is very similar to Erik Bulatov’s juxtaposition of a three-dimensional perspectival space of the picture and a two-dimensional political slogan superimposed on it (Fig. 2), or, in a somewhat different manner, to that employed in the visual artworks of Pinczehelyi, the Cuban artists, or the subREAL group in Romania:

In March 1990 (a few months after the fall of the Ceaușescu dictatorship) subREAL exhibited in Bucharest portraits of the newly elected President Iliescu which “raised a controversial scandal and a dispute between those who suspected a new adulatory attitude and those who condemned the irreverent gesture. As usual, subREAL was misunderstood by everybody, and that was paradoxically satisfactory for this group.”<sup>6</sup>

With this exhibition subREAL purposefully attained a paradoxical reception: one side (the official one) accused the group of mocking the immediate successor to Ceaușescu, implying hence a modernist critical or typically dissident stance, while the other, the “dissident” side, comprehended the gesture as an accolade to the regime.

Both interpretations, as long they strove to attain exclusiveness, were erroneous, of course; simultaneously they could not be conceptually grasped as a whole, for they were incompatible. Just as in Fichtean dialectics, where thesis and anti-thesis never reach a synthesis, here too both interpretations exist side by side: never coexisting in a conceptual sublation, never attaining a unity, creating by this very gesture an abyss between the visual and the conceptual, an unrepresentable whole.

Related phenomena are the performances and statements of music groups, such as Laibach from Slovenia. By presenting itself since its inception in 1980 as an excessive simulacrum of political ideology it created a paradox similar to that of subREAL. Consider the following statements by Laibach: “Every art is an object of political manipulation except that which speaks the language of that manipulation itself” (1984); “Politics is the highest and an all-embracing art and we, who create contemporary Slovenian art, consider ourselves to be politicians” (1985); “Our freedom is the freedom of those who think alike” (1985); “We believe in God, but unlike Americans we don’t trust him” (1987).

Today practically all of the art I have just discussed is a past phenomenon. This does not signify that the artists are no longer there or that they have ceased to make art. On the contrary, but the art they produce now is of a very different nature than it was in the seventies, eighties or perhaps the first few years of the nineties. It is more international or, if it remains “national,” it often exploits its own socialist past. What I have therefore presented in this lecture is an episode in the career of some artists, or, in some cases, their whole career. It is also a presentation of the rather unique art and culture of a certain period of recent history, created within the confines of the post-socialist condition. Today most of such art has joined or became assimilated into the international or global contemporary art where it has lost its social, political and national specifics. As so often in the history of art it is only recently attracting proper attention, that is, now, when its main works and protagonists are already things and persons of the past. If in other countries this late socialist or post-socialist art became assimilated and integrated in the international global artistic framework, it is hoped that contemporary Chinese art of such kind will retain its specifics and uniqueness. Recent cases of this art allow for the hope that this will be so.

## NOTES

- 1 The topic is further analyzed in Aleš Erjavec (ed.), *Aesthetic Revolutions and Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Movements* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
- 2 Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 1-2.
- 3 Lóránd Hegyi, “Sándor Pinczehelyi’s Emblematic Art,” in Imre Bukta, *Sándor Pinczehelyi, Géza Samu. Ungheria* (Venezia: XLIII La Biennale di Venezia, 1988), unpaginated.
- 4 Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p. 143.
- 5 Gerardo Mosquera, in *The Nearest Edge of the World. Art and Cuba Now* (Brookline, MA: Polarities, 1990), p. 44.
- 6 Călin Dan, “Art + Politics = No Art / No Politics,” in *New Observations*, no. 91 (September/October 1992), p. 7.

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## SAVREMENI ESTETIČAR KAO TERAPEUT NESRAZMERE MEĐU ČULIMA

**Dragan Prole**

Prvo deo članka izlaže pozadinu i motivaciju Makluanovog pojma otuđenja kao posledicu moderne vizuelne kulture. Budući da je ta kultura prevashodno proizvedena posredstvom tradicionalnih medija, a ne putem ekonomskih organizacija, uvid u strukturu medija otkriva postojanje izvesne nesrazmere među čulima. Imajući u vidu da je za tu nesrazmeru odgovoran linearni svet pisma, autor analizira Makluanovu sugestiju da okret prema novim elektronskim medijima implicira savremene promene u kojima će novi mediji destruirati staro sopstvo. Nakon razmatranja razloga za krajnje optimistična očekivanja od novih audio-vizuelnih medija u pružanju podrške za uspostavljanje izvornog, balansirano i uravnoteženog čoveka, autor razmatra održivost ideje o stvaranju nove medijske samosvesti zahvaljujući doprinosima studiranja novih pristupa različitim modelima čulnosti. U zaključku autor naglašava da estetičar onda nije ekspert za umetničku transcendenciju, nego terapeuta ugrožene ravnoteže među čulima.

KLJUČNE REČI: MAKLUAN, AVANGARDE, OTUĐENJE, ČULNA SRAZMERA, CELOKUPNI ČOVEK

## DISCIPLINSKA KRIZA U VREDNOVANJU UMETNOSTI

**Nataša Lah**

Uopšteno govoreći, vrednost među objektima – kao i među umetničkim vrednostima – definišu se na osnovu posebno značajnih odlika i uslova koji razlikuju npr. privilegovanje tog umetničkog dela u okviru porodice srodnih pojava i predmeta; prvo u vreme nastanka, a onda i u sadašnjem vremenu. Istorija estetike i kulture odražavaju nestabilan status uslova koji određuju umetničke vrednosti, tj. uslova za istorijsku promenu vrednovanja. Predmeti ili pojave koji tokom istorije pretenduju da budu ono što danas nazivamo vrednim umetničkim delima, stekli su neophodne kvalifikacije u okviru hijerarhijskog okvira kulturne potražnje njihovog vremena. Dinamičan sistem promena ujednačavanja vrednosti umetničkih dela sa njihovim društvenim statusom doveo je do disciplinarnе krize teorije umetnosti koja nije uspela da se prilagodi aksiološki novim načinima prijema umetnosti, ni savremenim standardima. U tom smislu, daču kratak prikaz krize sa stanovišta osnovnih pitanja u vezi značenja lepote, vrednosti i vrednovanja u okviru kulture i umetnosti tokom istorije. Lociraću fokus ove krize u okviru perioda od šesnaestog do osamnaestog veka (bez romantizma) kada je istorija umetnosti postala jasno izražena disciplina, uključujući mehanizme vrednovanja tog perioda u svoju posebnu metodološku matricu, kao da je ona vanvremenska i neistorijska.

KLJUČNE REČI: AKSILOGIJA UMETNOSTI, ISTORIJSKE PARADIGME VREDNOVANJA, AKSILOŠKA MATRICA  
ISTORIJE UMETNOSTI, KULTURNO PRIHVATANJE VREDNOSTI

## POSTMODERNIZAM I POST-SOCIJALISTIČKI USLOV: 15 GODINA KASNIJE (2003-2018)

**Aleš Erjavec**

Autor daje kratak rezime koncepta „post-socijalističkog“ ili avangardnog pokreta „treće generacije“. On objašnjava istorijske i političke uslove koji su omogućili pojavljivanje ove specifične avangardne umetnosti. Po njegovom mišljenju, jedinstvena vrsta umetnosti se pojavila u socijalističkim zemljama tokom raspada socijalizma sovjetskog tipa usled sličnih okolnosti. Kada su se globalni i lokalni politički uslovi promenili, ova umetnost je uglavnom nestala, ostavljajući za sobom samo tragove svog postojanja. Autor ističe specifične likovne mehanizme korišćene u ovakvoj umetnosti i tvrdi da je treba priznati kao još jednu vrstu avangardne umetnosti dvadesetog veka.

KLJUČNE REČI: POST-SOCIJALIZAM, POSTMODERNIZAM, AVANGARDNI POKRETI TREĆE GENERACIJE, RUSIJA, ISTOČNA EVROPA, KINA