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Transgressing the Borders of Gallery Space. Heterotopian Practices of ‘Alternative’ Art Galleries in Poland and East Germany of the 1970s

My project undertakes the first comparative study of parallel development of ‘alternative’ art galleries in Poland and East Germany in the 1970s, as these galleries accommodated and promoted the practices of artists challenging the officially sanctioned artistic paradigms. I see the emergence of those art spaces as resulting from a number of cultural-political conditions which prevailed in the 1970s under Honecker and Gierek leaderships such as the part-liberalisation of culture, the atmosphere of European détente, or growth of grass-roots dissent. The phenomenon came to existence in both official and private spaces, however, for the purpose of my thesis, I limit myself to two case studies of state-funded galleries which functioned under auspices of socialist institutions or organisations. As such, I am focussing on artistic and exhibition practices that were produced in spaces of East Berliner gallery *Arkade*- run between 1973 and 1981 by the art historian Klaus Werner, and of Warsaw gallery *Repassage* functioning 1971-1981 under directorship of various artists but mainly the artist couple Elżbieta and Emil Cieślak.

The analysis of the two case studies is divided into two parts: the 1st part constitutes examples of ‘transgressive’ artistic practice produced inside the gallery spaces such as the 1975 joint exhibition of Edward Krasinski’s and Daniel Buren’s works in *Repassage* and the 1978 mail-art exhibition *Postkarten und Künstlerkarten* in *Arkade*; the 2nd part discusses examples of group projects that were realised outside the physical gallery space such as the group art action *Repassaż Miejski* organised by *Repassage* artists in 1974 and artistic *pleinairs* organised by Klaus Werner under the auspices of *Arkade* between 1974 and 1981. In general, the division aims at exposing the spatially different positions and viewpoints in relation to the recipients but also to political power¹ and how the latter reacted to the artists’ position-taking.

As such my thesis sheds light on issues relating to ‘alternative’ art production within the specific regimes and on the relationship between art and state socialism during this key decade in the post-Stalinist phase of the Eastern Bloc. The comparison will revise our

¹ Malcolm Milles, *Art, space and the city: public art and urban futures*, (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 32-33

understanding of comparable and contrasting chronologies of aesthetic and cultural-political development in the GDR and PRL. Most importantly, however, my project seeks to answer the question, in what ways, and if at all, these examples of artistic practice can be seen as ‘subversive’ given the cultural-political circumstances of the 1970s decade in both contexts. A close examination of the institutional and political ties that bound these galleries to the power structures will expose also the extent to which the artists’ efforts to undermine the socialist order were compromised. This, in turn, leads to the question of the functions of ‘alternative’ art galleries such as *Repassage* and *Arkade* within the specific socialist regimes. I argue that these ‘alternative’ art spaces, produced by their directors and the associated artists, could be seen as examples of Michel Foucault’s *heterotopias of illusion*.² Seen through this theoretical perspective, the activities of *Repassage* and *Arkade* had both a destabilising and stabilising function within the socialist culture. Functioning as spaces in which artistic ‘deviance’ could be enacted and which expose everything outside as even more illusory, they were both contesting and reinforcing the order and power relations outside. Further, as Edward Soja suggests, the peripheralness, here in terms of the galleries’ artistic, institutional and ideological differentiation, can also be a strategic position that disorders, disrupts and transgresses the centre-periphery relationship. In this way, the counter-hegemonic cultural practices push against oppressive boundaries set by political power.³

In order to approach these research questions, I draw on both archival material and oral history interviews. I have gathered and used extensive primary data in the form of state documentation, exhibition catalogues, photographic and film documentation, press/periodical releases and other publications from the 1970s, as well as reports from the state security services of both regimes. I have also conducted a number of interviews with artists involved in the galleries’ activities.

For the purpose of the conference I shall also look more closely at two specific examples of group art projects, namely, the group art action *Repassaż Miejski* and the 1977 *Arkade*’s pleinair in Leussow. The former consisted of installations and performances set up outside the gallery space on various streets and in public places around the centre of Warsaw. It was intended as an ‘importation of artistic activities into the life of municipal body’ and

² Michel Foucault, ‘Of other spaces’, (1967) (trans. Lieven de Cauter and Michiel Dhaene) in Lieven de Cauter and Michiel Dhaene (eds), *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*, (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp.14-23

³ Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 197

establishing a new relationship between an artist and the community.⁴ Despite the initial approval of local socialist authorities, ultimately, the event had to be significantly modified and separated from the street life due to state's intervention. The pleinair in the holiday village Leussow was a 2 week-long meeting of non-conformist GDR artists organised by Klaus Werner. During the meeting the famous land-art action *Leussow-Recycling* was realised by *Clara Mosch* artists and later followed by a multiple *Leussow Koffer*. Described by Klaus Werner as a 'spontaneous confrontation of artists with nature'⁵⁵, *Leussow-Recycling* undermined the official prescriptions of state power which were antagonistic towards Western art discourse and conceptual art practice. And yet, as the Stasi documentation reveals, the pleinairs were under close surveillance of the state security service which, although aware of the nature of artists' activities, did not interrupted their realisation.

⁴ *Repassaż Miejski 9.6.1974*, Exhibition Catalogue, (Warsaw: Repassage Gallery, 1974), p.2

⁵ Klaus Werner as in the text included in the multiple *Leussow Koffer*, Lindenau Museum Altenburg