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Exchange of Exhibitions between Poland and Czechoslovakia during the Cold War

My research looks at the history of Central-Eastern European art from a different perspective which is history of exhibitions in international context. I put special effort into including official institutions and events into the narrative – elements that are often ignored and forgotten in favour of dissident stories.

I have selected neighbouring countries of the Eastern Bloc – People's Republic of Poland and Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (until 1960 Czechoslovak Republic). Piotr Piotrowski mentioned artistic contacts between Poland and Czechoslovakia in *Avant-Garde in the Shadow of Yalta* saying that Polish and Czechoslovak artists had a came into contact during the *Arguments* exhibition, organised in 1962 in Warsaw's Krzywe Koło (Crooked Wheel) Gallery.¹

In order to draw a more complete picture of those possible encounters (not only personal but also through art) I am trying to establish history of exhibitions sent from one country to the other during the Cold War. Archival research proves that there were numerous exhibitions tackling diverse subjects, eras and artistic techniques. Moreover, the agenda behind these shows is not to be taken for granted but to be carefully examined through archival material, catalogue texts, artists' list and press reviews. It is also crucial to try to point out the agents responsible for events in question as well as their viewers.

When preparing a timeline of exhibitions, I noticed that these shows of art often functioned in an exchange system. In 1954, the Central Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions in Warsaw presented an exhibition titled "Czechoslovak Art of 19 and 20 Century" whereas in 1959 in Prague visitors could admire Matejko's famous "Battle of Grunwald" at the National Gallery's Waldstein Riding School during the exhibition "Polish Painting from Canaletto to

¹ P. Piotrowski, *Awangarda w cieniu Jalty: Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945–1989*, Poznań, 2005, pp. 89.

Wyspiański". Contacts between Prague and Łódź led to shows like "Jindřich Štyrský. Painting, drawing, collage, photography" staged in 1969 at the Museum of Art in Łódź and "Henryk Stażewski. Reliefs from 1967-1969" displayed at the National Gallery in Prague in 1970. "Czech cubism" presented at the National Museum in Warsaw in 1981 came with an agreement to send to Prague "Xawery Dunikowski. Sculptures and drawings", presented at the National Gallery also in 1981.

Many of the exhibitions I write about were a form of execution of official cultural contacts. It opens up the question of exhibitions understood as an image-forming and propaganda tool used to advertise or even impose a certain vision of country as well as nation.

I am examining the question of building of national and state identity as well the „brotherly friendship” between socialist countries, common Slavic ancestry, presence and role of Slovak part of Czechoslovakia (especially in light of federalisation of the country), treatment of minorities and relation of exhibitions to important political events. I am investigating in what ways the exhibitions presented socialism, progress, modernity, avant-garde and were used as an image-forming and propaganda tool. I am analysing their role as platforms for sharing information, ideas and artistic tendencies in times of isolation.

My approach comes as a result of questioning the two-sided narrative of history of post-war Eastern European Art. At the same time, I am not trying to exclude unofficial events and artists who were then working in isolation but are gaining prominence now. I am trying to trace those events and individuals in relation to artistic groups, institutions and exhibitions which put them into the position they were in. With this case study I am hoping to provide an example of a more complex and less black-and-white perspective on post-war history of art in Central-Eastern Europe.