

Zsuzsa László

Artpool Art Research Center / Eötvös Loránd University

The Emergence and Critique of the Concept “East European Art”: Figures of Misunderstanding and Cultural Translation

My dissertation explores how the concept of “East European Art” was shaped by international art events of the 1970s and the related art theoretical discourses. I put forward the thesis that this concept emerged in the *situation* of exhibitions triggering transnational dialogs. After surveying several prevailing approaches I finally propose a situative, dialogical interpretation of the term through the close reading of misunderstandings and cultural translations in the *exhibition*-history of East-European Art. Eastern-Europe is in itself a problematic notion with several contested historical, geographical, social-political as well as cultural interpretations, debated overlaps with and differentiation from such adjacent terms as Central-Europe, East-Central Europe, Soviet/Socialist Bloc, or semi-periphery. These polemics left their trace on how the art of this region has been contextualized in addition to several factors specific to the sphere of visual arts. Preoccupation with regional characterology, the dialectics of national and universal art, and the conflict between local traditions, international avant-garde, and the doctrine of realism was replaced towards the end of the 1970s by the challenge of synchronicity with western movements as well as visibility and comprehensibility in the international art world as the most urgent questions for the region. At the same time, exhibitions in Western Europe raised interest for the art “from behind the iron curtain” exoticized, homogenized, and historicized as provincial, ideologized, or dissident, which in turn received its criticism from East-European artists.

My dissertation is structured around case studies of the following art events: Klaus Groh’s 1972 *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa*, the meeting of Czech, Slovak and Hungarian artists in György Galántai’s Balatonboglár Chapel Studio in 1972, the 1976 Contextual Art Symposium in Toronto, and the “Works and Works” manifestation at De Appel in Amsterdam in 1979. Correspondence preparing these events and the deciphering efforts entailed by the juxtaposition of art practices rooted in mutually obscure cultural environments reveal that the utopia of avant-garde as a common language was more and more debunked in the increasingly globalized art world. The significance of the social context in the interpretation of artworks and the inevitable misunderstanding of a work that was created in a context different from ours was an important finding in Marxist art history. Though it was mainly applied to the interpretative difficulties of historical artworks, I propose that it became highly relevant for transnational artistic exchanges too. Similarly, the theory of cultural translation developed in the sphere of decolonial discourse gained relevance for the Babelian confusion surrounding the international presentations of East

European Art. My aim is not only to explore the hermeneutic challenges these art events posed but I also endeavour to present examples of artistic practices that thematize these and thus create a self-reflective and self-defined East-European Art.

Investigating the curatorial motivations, institutional and artistic strategies, organizational circumstances, artist-curator and artist-artist negotiations, interpretative difficulties, reception as well as the aftermath of these events I propose a non-essential, but a polyphonic, contextual-hermeneutic model for the concept of East-European Art. In addition to theoretical literature, my research is based on the review of press debates, unpublished archival material, documents, correspondence, and interviews. I examine international art events and discourses of regional relevance but I also reflect on the fact that I cannot take a neutral viewpoint on these questions and that my approach and interpretations are embedded in my linguistically, historically, and culturally specific Hungarian context.