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The Formation of the Canon of Czech Modern Art: 1945-1995

My projects aim to describe the process of formation of the canon in the context of Czech modern art. The chosen period is between the end of second world war and the year 1995. That is the year, when the first official permanent exhibition of Czech modern art was open in the new National gallery's building, the renovated Trade Fair Palace. The communist party dominated Czechoslovakia for most of the years chosen for my project and the relationship of politics and art, especially the national art is also discussed in the thesis.

Between 1945-1995 and especially between the years 1959-1986 there were numerous exhibitions called "Czech modern art" or a variation of this title, most of them were focused on paintings. That means, that the whole generation of art historians must repeatedly answer the question, what is the Czech modern art and more or less consciously constitute the canon through the selection of artists represented on the exhibition. My main research question is, how the forming process of the canon took place and how the canon changed during the time in the context of methodological, social-political, and historical changes. Although this is the main interest of the research, I am also studying, what are the future possibilities of art history in the context of digital humanities because of the methods I am using and the issues I need to solve during this research.

For the research I am analyzing which artists appear most often on these exhibitions. There were 38 exhibitions during this period, that have the name I correlated to the topic and that have the information about presenting artists available through catalogues or other documents. There were 929 names on these 38 exhibitions. I created the core group around 75 names and I am researching how were they're successful in other terms. That means how many solo exhibitions they had and how often they participated on collective exhibitions. The next step is looking at the geographical location of their exhibitions. An interesting phenomenon I just discovered is that the artists mostly start in the center and only during their careers, they have more and more exhibitions in the periphery. I am also interested in how the belonging to an artistic group influence their presence in exhibitions, or how their political view influenced their career.

My research is based on quantitative research, which means I am working mainly with databases of exhibitions and with databases of exhibitions catalogues. There are many database building projects in the last years collecting information about artists, exhibitions, or collectors. But as I quickly realized many of them are built just as a passive tool and it's very complicated to get any metadata from it. That means I am using the existing databases because it is impossible for me to do the research alone, but I combine several of them into my own files, so I am able to make visualization, charts, diagrams and get the results I need. That brings me to one of the issues I am solving in my thesis and that is the accessibility of knowledge. The digitalization and the building of databases and other software are often presented as democratization of knowledge because it could be accessible for anyone. The reality is that most of the information are accessible only with the institutional or paid account.

The second issue with the databases is, that the software is often built to solve the issues right now. Once the issue changes, the database becomes obsolete, because it can't respond to the new task. If we want to use the digital tools (not only databases) we also need to discuss what the art history wants from these tools.

Because of the nature of my research, my thesis is not about giving the correct answers, my data could be corrupted or incomplete, but it is more about asking the right questions and searching all the possibilities how to solve a chosen issue.