



Krista Kodres / Kristina Jõekalda / Michaela Marek (Eds.)

A Socialist Realist History?

Writing Art History in the Post-War Decades



Das östliche Europa: Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte

Herausgegeben von
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Krista Kodres, Kristina Jõekalda, Michaela Marek: A Socialist Realist History?

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A SOCIALIST REALIST HISTORY?

Writing Art History in the Post-War Decades

BÖHLAU VERLAG WIEN KÖLN WEIMAR

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Cover:

Art history students attending a drawing lesson given by Dozent Juhan Püttsepp at the University of Tartu Art Museum. From left: Ene Lamp, Mart Eller and Reet Nuust. (Photo by E. Jasenov, 1958. Courtesy of the Film Archives of the National Archives of Estonia, EFA.205.0-54465.)

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Dedicated to the memory of professor Michaela Marek (1956–2018)

OBITUARY: MICHAELA MAREK (22 August 1956–24 September 2018)

Our colleague Michaela Marek passed away in autumn 2018. We initially got to know her as a dedicated colleague – a lecturer, debater, and not least an organizer of events on Eastern Europe – with a confident manner and a refreshingly critical attitude. Nevertheless, her scholarly activities did not immediately focus on Eastern Central Europe. Born in Prague, Michaela Marek read art history, Romance studies and psychology in Cologne, London and Rome. In 1981, she was awarded a doctorate for her thesis *Ekphrasis and the Allegory of the Ruler: Ancient Descriptions of Paintings in the Work of Titian and Leonardo* (published as a monograph in Worms, 1985). Subsequently, she was a research fellow at Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome and the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, where she studied the works of Fra Angelico, Raffael and Donatello. The Renaissance continued to play a prominent role in her teaching activities at universities in Germany and Austria alongside her work at the Herder Institute in Marburg (1986–1992) and Collegium Carolinum in Munich (1992–2000).

Michaela Marek monitored the political changes after 1989 in a series of publications as well as events she devised and organized. Her knowledge of Czech enabled her to strengthen ties with Czech and Slovak researchers. Her new areas of interest included the effects of political and social upheaval on artistic processes, scholarly institutions, and not least the development of art history as a discipline. These areas were also the focus of the study *Art and Identity Policy: Architecture and Visual Arts in the Process of Czech Nation-Building* (published as a monograph in Cologne, 2004) with which Michaela Marek earned her habilitation at the University of Kiel in 2000. That same year, she was appointed professor of art history of Eastern Europe at Leipzig University, where she remained until moving to the Humboldt University in Berlin in 2013.

When Elena Mohr from the Böhlau publishing house proposed launching an art history series devoted to Eastern and Central Europe at the 2012 CIHA Congress in Nuremberg, it was immediately obvious that this undertaking could only be managed by a team. We were delighted when Michaela Marek agreed to join this endeavour as co-editor.

We soon got down to brass tacks and launched the series *Kunst und Kultur im östlichen Europa*. From the outset, it was important to us to create a platform for publications on different epochs, applying different methodological approaches, and addressing different geographical areas. In addition, our aim remains to combine our knowledge about the complex processes of artistic and cultural development in Eastern Europe while also exploring its pan-European and global significance.

Our regular meetings in the office of Michaela Marek, whose kind hospitality we were fortunate enough to enjoy, paid off. The volumes published since 2015 profited in all sorts of ways from her wealth of experience. In addition to her excellent networking in the research community, this included her dedication as a lecturer and doctoral supervisor,

not to mention her expertise regarding the ins and outs involved in book production. This anthology focuses on art historiography against the background of regime change in Eastern Europe immediately after the end of the Second World War. This volume co-edited by Michaela Marek thus deals with an early period of art historiography under the conditions of rivalry between political systems – a field which was of great interest to her in recent years and to which she made a significant contribution.

Given this, the loss of our esteemed colleague is all the more painful. By continuing this series, it is important to us to preserve the memory of Michaela Marek and her intellectual influence.

Berlin, January 2019

Ada Raev and Robert Born

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KRISTA KODRES / KRISTINA JÕEKALDA

Introductory Remarks to Socialist Art History On Formulating the Soviet Canon

In a work of art, we are interested, above all,
in its objective content and the measure of its truthfulness [...].¹

In March 1949, a meeting to discuss ideological questions took place in the great hall of the Soviet Estonian University of Tartu. Its content was published as an article in the newspaper of the Estonian Communist (Bolshevist) Party, *Rahva Häääl* (The voice of people). The piece included a summary of the complaints of a certain comrade Jaanimäe, an employee of the agitprop department, against the university's chair of art history. The criticism listed the following allegations: firstly, that the chair's work has lost touch with real life; secondly, that nothing was being done to develop Estonian art criticism; thirdly, that bourgeois views had not yet been publicly reassessed at the department; fourthly, that the lecturers had not drawn the necessary conclusions from philosophical discussion (i. e. from Marxist-Leninist theory); and fifthly, that the relevant people had not mastered Marxist method, even though "without this there can be no achievements in scientific work".²

The professor under attack, Voldemar Vaga (1899–1999), published an article in the same newspaper in June 1949, *Against Bourgeois Anachronisms in Art History*, in which he regretted his pre-war "bourgeois-nationalistic and cosmopolitan" treatments of art history.³ In autumn of the same year the professor was to spend an extended stay in a mental hospital. As early as 1941, during the first Soviet occupation of Estonia,⁴ a campaign had been organized to destroy unacceptable books, in the course of which copies of Vaga's recent books *Estonian Art* and *General History of Art*⁵ – among many others – are reported to have been chopped into pieces with an axe and burned.⁶ Miraculously, the professor himself escaped the extensive purging of "hostile elements" within the cultural elites in

1 NEDOSHIVIN 1953, 122. – Translations are ours, where the bibliography does not state otherwise.

2 UIBO 1949. – See NÖMMELA 2008, 102.

3 VAGA 1949.

4 Estonia had been an independent democratic republic from 1918 to 1940. It was occupied twice by the Soviet Union, first in 1940–1941, with the second occupation lasting from 1944 to 1991. For details see e. g. SMIRNOV 2003, 55–62; ZUBKOVA 2008.

5 VAGA 1937–1938; VAGA 1940–1941.

6 LOTMAN 2000, 95–103; ESNA 2014. – For the background see also ELLER 1994, 63–110, here 72–75; LAMP 2002, 9–16, here 14–15.



Fig. 1 Oil paintings rescued from the ruins of Tartu Art Museum (established in 1940), photographer unknown, 1943. Courtesy of Tartu Art Museum (Tartmus) photo archive.

Soviet Estonia (and the whole Soviet Union) in 1949–1951. During these years in Estonia, about 200 scientists, 20 writers, 15 artists, 10 composers and 20 actors, which made up 20–25% of all members of these professional groups, were removed from professional work for periods of at least ten years.⁷ In many cases this meant deportation to Siberia.

Historians, including art historians, had already been given clear instructions on how to go about their work in 1945 by the first secretary of the Communist Party of Estonia, Nikolai Karotamm: among the most important issues to be addressed was the history of the party and the working-class movement, the shared historic battles of Estonians and Russians against the Germans, the historical friendship of the Estonian and Russian peoples, and the necessity to criticize the period of bourgeois independence.⁸ Also Johannes Semper, head of the Arts Council of the Estonian SSR (Eesti NSV Kunstide Valitsus, the predecessor of the Ministry of Culture), who had been one of the initiators of the campaign of book destruction, strongly emphasized the objective that “the previous cultural heritage must be viewed critically and reevaluated”.⁹

7 KARJAHÄRM / SIRK 2007, 225.

8 KAROTAMM 1947, 14–44, here 38.

9 ENSV 1945.

What we have just described here was the culmination of an instruction commonly referred to as the *Zhdanovshchina*, an ideological doctrine set out by Andrei Zhdanov to express Stalinist cultural policy as it was refined after World War II (fig. 1), to be pursued throughout the whole of the multinational Soviet Union. The doctrine was to prove effective through the fear and self-censorship induced by the terror used to enforce it. The Stalinist political elite in the Soviet Union presupposed obedience and did everything possible to force the entire Socialist bloc to follow their rules and regulations. The formulation of the rules applicable to the cultural field, including the discipline of art history, was what allowed the regime to operate and to control its opponents effectively and what gave Stalinist politics their sustainability. At the same time, this fear and self-censorship acquired collective dimensions, bringing along with it what can be seen as one of the most typical features of the Soviet society, namely the emergence of “split personalities” – individuals who had their particular views on art, society, politics etc., but who often acted along completely different lines in their professional practice.

The canon of what we might call “Socialist art history” was formulated precisely during these post-war years. Since the mid-1950s, the Thaw initiated by Nikita Khrushchev, which was exported to the Warsaw Pact countries under the slogan “Socialist (proletarian) internationalism”,¹⁰ relaxed the ideological norms that applied to culture to a certain degree. Among other things, this relaxation brought about an animated discussion on the art historical discourse. Thus, Stalinism on the one hand, and what has been called late Socialism (starting in the late 1950s) on the other, offered two very different “regimes of discourse”, the latter being a “pragmatic” one.¹¹ These two regimes stipulated what “story” art historians would (and could) narrate to their audiences and what meaning they would (and possibly could) attribute to specific works of art.

SOCIALIST ART HISTORIES

What, then, was this “Socialist art history” whose content was to be filled out during the decades to come? Obviously, there is no single and simple answer to that question. Research into the history of art historiography has been acknowledged as a discipline in its own right for some time now, and also the Soviet perspective to it has benefitted from a number of scholarly studies. All the fruits of this research would be impossible to list here.¹² Some have

10 ROMANOVSKI 1966, 45; PONOMARJOV et al. 1975, 575. – See MEYER 1973, 145–189; DRENGENBERG 1973, 250–299. – See also Virve Sarapik, CIHA Congresses and Soviet Internationalism, in this book.

11 YURCHAK 2003, 480–510, here 480–481.

12 One of the first publications to address the history of post-war East European art historiography was BORN / JANATKOVÁ / LABUDA 2004. From 2003 to 2007 the European Science Foundation financed the project *Discourses of the Visible: National and International Perspectives*, which culminated with

set a regional focus for themselves,¹³ while others have been centered around a specific subject matter.¹⁴ The tendency to look anew at the history of local art history is clearly visible in numerous national publications, which are often written in local languages, however, and thus not very accessible to international readers.

In this collection of articles, the authors attempt to figure out the specific rules that applied within the discipline of Socialist art history, and ask how these rules are reflected in the narratives of the history of art in the various countries of the Soviet bloc with a focus on the first post-war decades (even if some articles stretch until as late as the 1980s). One often tends to take the position that East Europe was more or less uniform during the Soviet era, while in reality the social and political contexts may have displayed significant and fundamental variations. This edited collection is inspired by the papers presented at the conference *Art History and Socialism(s) After World War II: The 1940s Until the 1960s* in October 2016 (fig. 2, 3).¹⁵ The three-day discussions in Tallinn during that event proved that, aside from the Marxist-Leninist discourse “invented” in and enforced from Moscow (Moskva), Socialist art history writing – just like the post-war Socialist regimes themselves¹⁶ – accommodated numerous variations for a variety of reasons, some historical and others contemporary. Aside from the changes that occurred as time went on, and especially with de-Stalinization, it is worth constantly keeping in mind the diversity of the Eastern bloc. But there were also, as the articles in our volume demonstrate, many similarities in the diverse approaches to artistic heritage. It is among the major aims of our collection to deepen knowledge of the similarities and discrepancies shown by the various Socialist art histories. We aim to explore just how far-reaching the process of Sovietization of the

another edited volume (RAMPLEY et al. 2012). From 2009 to 2011, the Clark Art Institute organized a series of seminars in Tallinn, Brno and Budapest under the heading *Unfolding Narratives: Art Histories in East-Central Europe After 1989*, which tackled the Socialist past of the discipline (see DOERRING 2010, 147–151). In 2013 a separate section was devoted to the topic within the Congress of German Art Historians (*Kunsthistorikertag*): BERNHARDT / KEMPE 2015.

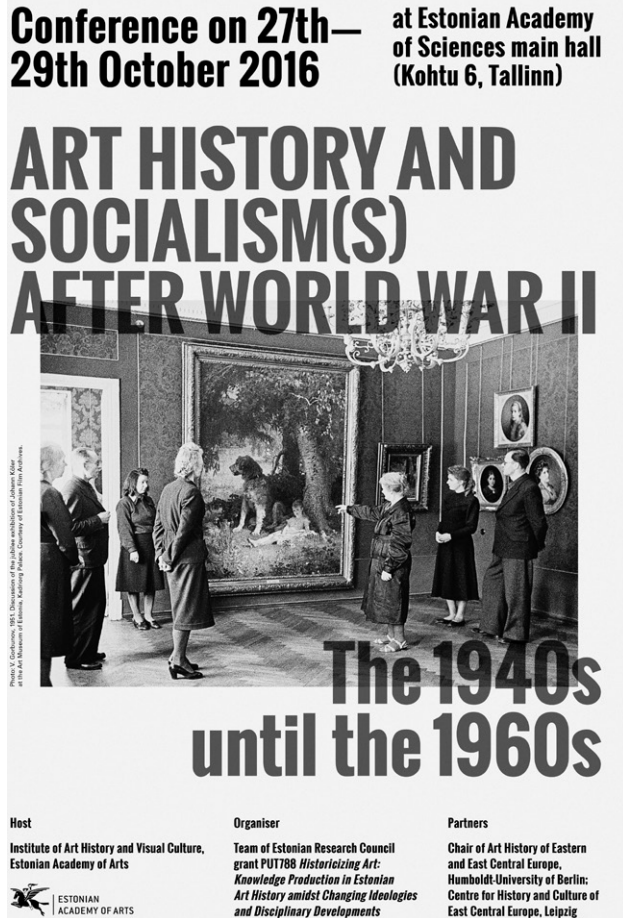
13 The formation of a group of researchers interested in the art historiography of the Baltic countries led in 2009 to the first conference of Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian art historians in Tallinn, followed by the volume *The Geographies of Art History in the Baltic Region* (KIVIMAA 2010). Since then three joint conferences have followed – representing the restoration of a tradition that had existed in the Soviet era: in 2011 in Kaunas (DOVYDAITYTĖ 2012) and in 2016 in Riga (ĀBELE 2018). – For studies on the history of Central European art history, see e. g. BAKOŠ 2013; BARTLOVÁ 2016.

14 For example, the colloquia held in Germany on the research on Renaissance (DMITRIEVA / KEMPE 2015) and Baroque art (see MAREK / PLUHAŘOVÁ-GRIGIENĖ 2016, 1–3, and the rest of the edited section in the *Journal of Art Historiography*).

15 See the reports: KODRES 2016b; ZLYDNEVA 2017a–b, 201–205 and 113–117, respectively. – A follow-up conference, *Socialist Internationalism & the Global Contemporary: Transnational Art Historiographies from Eastern and East-Central Europe*, was organized by Marina Dmitrieva, Beata Hock and Antje Kempe in November 2017 at the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO) in Leipzig.

16 For a detailed overview of the period see e. g. JUDT 2005.

Fig. 2 Poster of the conference *Art History and Socialism(s) After World War II: The 1940s Until the 1960s*, design by Mikk Heinsoo (Stuudio Stuudio). The historical photograph by Vladimir (?) Gorbunov depicts a discussion at the jubilee exhibition of Estonian 19th-century painter Johann Köler at the Art Museum of Estonia (Kadriorg Palace) in 1951. Courtesy of the Film Archives under the National Archives of Estonia.



discourse was: how were Socialist ideas and practices adopted under the specific cultural and institutional conditions of each country, and which alternatives were found to them.

One of the most important topics tackled in all of these art histories was the problem of *realism*. The collection of issues related to realistic modes of depiction acted as a litmus paper for the art historical narratives of the period, and hence – inspired by the captivating title of Juliana Maxim’s contribution to this collection¹⁷ – we found that the “Socialist Realist” way of writing history could serve as a good metaphor for the phenomenon of Socialist art histories taken as a whole. Although the Eastern bloc is not covered evenly in the volume – it is missing accounts from Hungary and several Baltic and Balkan states, for example – we are confident that wider conclusions can be drawn from the articles.

17 See Juliana Maxim, *A Socialist Realist History? Grigore Ionescu’s Histories of Architecture*.



Fig. 3 Participants of the conference *Art History and Socialism(s) After World War II: The 1940s Until the 1960s* at the Estonian Academy of Sciences main building, former Ungern-Sternberg residence from mid-19th century in Tallinn. Photograph by Kristina Jõekalda.

In the introductory chapter of the book we intend to examine the topic of what a “Socialist art history” was originally intended to be, focusing on how the fundamental issues of art history were treated by its central ideologues, the leading art scholars representing the official discourse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. This perspective – which requires elaboration of the Soviet canon of art history in the making – is essential in that it provided the source that set out the norm for East European art history writing: in other words, the above-mentioned variations in approaches to art history tended to be either adaptations of or refusals to follow this norm. It is important to emphasize here that in the post-war decades the Soviet art history discourse itself did not in fact constitute a static set of rules, but underwent changes occurring together with political developments within the huge Socialist empire. These changes in the discipline are well reflected in periodicals (some of which were closed down in the first Socialist years)¹⁸ and in scholarly monographs, and it is through such publications that we intend to mark out the main views that characterized Soviet interpretations of a Socialist art history.

18 This is also the approach taken by Katja Bernhardt’s article *Congenial Kunstwissenschaft: The Discussion on Art in the East German Zeitschrift für Kunst (1947–1950)*, and the starting point for Milena Bartlová’s *New Political Orientation of Czech Art History Around 1950* in this book.

THE JUDGEMENT OF ART HISTORY

Before looking back at the post-war decades in detail, we should remember that Socialist doctrine on art and the entire field of Soviet art history had in fact already begun taking shape during the interwar period. The approach was, naturally enough, founded upon the legacy of the Marxist-Leninist classics.¹⁹ The relationship between Socialism and artistic heritage was first formulated by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in 1920:

Marxism has won its historic significance as the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat because, far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, it has, on the contrary, assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture.²⁰

Thus, this great new progressive force of the society was presented as the true heirress of world culture – Marxism has “assimilated and refashioned everything of value”. In the 1930s, several thematic collections and anthologies were compiled in the Soviet Union on how Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels,²¹ and Lenin had touched upon questions of art.²² A remarkable contribution to the new art theory was provided by the Hungarian Marxist literary historian Georg (György) Lukács (1885–1971) whose theory of realism – developed in several essays and finalized in his 1934 article, *Art and Objective Truth* – became the basis for the Socialist Realist doctrine of literature and visual art.²³ The essence of Lukács’ gnoseological theory was that societies are entirely distinct wholes determined by their socio-economic formation, and that the progressive class within each society is the only force capable of determining art’s objective content. Objectivity did not consist in making a naturalist depiction of visible reality, but in creating an artistic generalization that constitutes an inherent characteristic of reality. According to Lukács, this social, objective content of human existence can be adequately captured only by means of realism.²⁴

When cultural policy became subject to wide discussion in the Soviet Union after World War II, questions of the interpretation of visual art, among other fields of culture,

19 The interrelationship between the understandings of Marxism on either side of the Iron Curtain is a different and vast subject matter that we shall not go into here. Even inside the Eastern bloc there were notable differences, but what was common was that the knowledge of “Western” Marxism was very limited.

20 LENIN 1965, 316–317, here 317.

21 See LIFSHITZ 1933; MARX / ENGELS 1937. – Translations: LIFSHITZ 1938a; MARX / ENGELS 1948.

22 LIFSHITZ 1938b. – See also STOLOVICH 1992, 9–29, here 12.

23 See LUKÁCS 1948; LUKÁCS 1970. – See also LAHUSEN / DOBRENKO 1997.

24 See LEHMANN 1995, 110.

grew in political and ideological importance. Although we are far from aiming to present a complete genealogy of the Stalinist interpretation of “Socialist art history”, we would nevertheless like to underline the main points of the programmatic texts that began to shape the discourse. Rather than looking into the implementation of the ideas introduced by these texts in practice – a task that we leave for the individual contributions in the volume – we seek to lay out the ideals of the Soviet canon of art history.

The first of these programmatic texts, an editorial published in the magazine of the Artists’ Union of the USSR, *Iskusstvo* (Art) in 1950, entitled *The Duty of Soviet Art Historians*, presented the Stalinist treatment of the Marxist idea of the base and superstructure of society as a groundwork upon which to establish a clear understanding of art history, and emphasized the need to “re-rewrite” the history of art according to the Marxist-Leninist method – on the basis of the “Soviet positions”.²⁵ Art historian Anatoly Shtambok’s article *Against the Idealistic Interpretation of the Development of Art* in the same issue of the magazine stipulated that art history, together with other humanities, belonged to “the sphere of social ideology”,²⁶ whose function was to educate the masses as they traveled along the path towards Communism. Hence, unsurprisingly, both texts stressed the active party role of art history and art historians in Socialist society.

The *Iskusstvo* editorial also outlined the fundamental position in relation to the *national* character of art – an issue that is addressed in many articles in our collection as another common feature in addition to *realism*. The topic of nationalism posed a particular challenge to the art historians due to its multivalent character in the Soviet context, existing as it did at some times in harmony with and at others in stark opposition to the official discourse. Both Lenin²⁷ and Stalin²⁸ supported the idea that during the Socialist phase of development the battle between bourgeois nationalism and proletarian internationalism that was characteristic of the capitalist system would at some stage disappear. The rhetoric of the Soviet leaders gave the impression of defending the principle of self-determination of nations, which had officially formed a foundation stone of the policy in the multinational Soviet Union; yet it also presumed that in time all nations and their cultures would necessarily unite.

The idea of the nation as a bearer of contemporary culture was viewed in a positive light, on condition that that culture was “Socialist in content”. The 1950 editorial too quotes Joseph Stalin’s *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*, published the same year, in

25 DUTY 1950, 3–6, here 5.

26 SHTAMBOK 1950, 55–65, here 56. – See AZATYAN 2009, 289–296, here 294.

27 One of the first articles by Lenin, *Theses on the National Question*, was published in the newspaper *Pravda* in 1913. In English: LENIN 1977, 243–251.

28 See e. g. Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*, from 1913. In English: STALIN 1953, 300–381.

which he repeated this famous formulation: “The contemporary Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian and other cultures are Socialist in content and national in form”.²⁹ The insistence on employing a national approach in art and in writing its history produced rather different results and strategies throughout the Eastern bloc, but all were to be accommodated under that same slogan.

However, in regard to the historical cultures the phenomenon of nation – which in such cases was regarded in Marxist-Leninist historiography as a product of capitalism – was difficult to apply. Therefore, for such cultures they appealed to a different theoretical construction: the idea of the simultaneous existence of two cultures. As described by Lenin in 1913, historical formations developing towards an increasingly progressive social order always contain two cultures – a progressive one and a reactionary one, each reflecting the corresponding classes in society:

The *elements* of democratic and socialist culture are present [...] in *every* national culture, since in *every* nation there are toiling and exploited masses [...]. But *every* nation also possesses a bourgeois culture (and most nations a reactionary and clerical culture as well) in the form, not merely of “elements”, but of the *dominant* culture.³⁰

Hence, a progressive art was always to be found in history – represented by its positive social content as a reflection of progressive culture. The idea of “positive content” tended to be equated with the subject of the artwork. For example, the art of Diego Velázquez, who had been active during the period of absolute monarchy, was judged positive not just because of its “realist” form, but also for its “folkish” content (*народность*) – its depiction of Spanish peasants.³¹

The first comprehensive post-war collection to seek to justify the theoretical foundations of the Socialist discourse on art history was a book published by the Institute of Art History (Институт истории искусств) at the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, titled *Against Bourgeois Art and Art History* (1950).³² The same collection was to be published in German (which had remained the *lingua franca* of East European humanities) in the German Democratic Republic in 1954.³³ The opening article, *Against Reactionary*

29 DUTY 1950, 4. – Cf. STALIN 1954.

30 LENIN 1964a, 17–51, here 24. – Cf. LENIN 1964b. – See also KODRES 2016a, 1–18.

31 MALITSKAYA 1947, 67–73. – It deserves to be mentioned that in many East European countries, there existed a “formula” to distinguish between different kinds of national traditions. In Estonian art historiography, for instance, separating the categories of native Estonian art, by ethnic Estonian artists (*eesti kunst*), and art produced on the territory of Estonia (*Eesti kunst*) from one another goes back to the interwar era, and these continued to be applied in the Soviet period.

32 GRABAR / KEMENOV 1951.

33 GRABAR / KEMENOV 1954.

Bourgeois Art and Art History, was written by Vladimir Kemenov (1908–1988),³⁴ deputy director of the Institute of Art History, who had already eagerly participated in the effort to work out the concept of Socialist Realism back in the 1930s. The other articles of the collection mainly dealt with two themes: the false views of American and West European contemporary “formalist” art (i. e. Surrealism, abstractionism, etc.), and “bourgeois art history” concerning the study of Renaissance.

The rhetoric of Kemenov’s article in its discussion of “bourgeois art historians” is both lurid and angry. The author’s conception of art history is clear – he considered realism the only “correct and objective” manner of depiction ever conceived of, thus inevitably forcing art historians to act as art critics with the duty to evaluate historical works along a realist–anti-realist axis. This ambivalent interspace between art historians and art critics, i. e. the question of *disciplinary boundaries*, is another large topic that keeps occurring in many contributions to our collection. Here, one has to take into account the differences in national schools and local traditions of art history, and in the varying boundaries between art history, art theory and art criticism³⁵ across the Eastern bloc – not least because the history of art itself was different in each country. In this volume, we have therefore assembled together studies that look at these various ways of writing about art, treating the historicizing gaze as their common denominator, while in some cases applying a historical perspective to very recent, almost contemporary art.³⁶

Kemenov’s second starting point was the Marxist-Leninist theory of history – that is to say, Lenin’s above-mentioned theory of two cultures, itself based on historical materialism. Thus, for example, the realism in Renaissance art allegedly reflected the emergence of the (then) progressive bourgeoisie on the arena of history. In the view of Kemenov – and of Viktor Lazarev (1897–1976) and Mikhail Alpatov (1902–1986) in the same collection³⁷ – Renaissance art represented “progressive ideological values” that included humanism, anti-clericalism and a closeness to people.³⁸ Thus the Renaissance was opposed to the anti-realist Gothic style and to Mannerism, which conveyed incorrect “social ideas”.³⁹ Kemenov criticized

34 KEMENOV 1951, 3–22.

35 Specific aspects of art criticism are further discussed in this book in the articles by Kädi Talvoja, (Re)nationalizing Estonian Art During the Thaw: Lively Legacy of Kristjan Raud, and by Karolina Łabowicz-Dymanus, Normative Practice and “Tradition Management” in the Polish Art and History of Art of the 1950s.

36 Whereas some intellectual communities witnessed a clear divide drawn between the fields within art studies, in smaller nations and less widely spoken languages – because these subdivisions often came down to human resources – one and the same scholar wrote on all sorts of matters relating to art, from history to criticism and theory, combining the expertise he or she had in all these fields, thus rendering such boundaries almost non-existent.

37 ALPATOV 1951, 129–154; LAZAREV 1951, 106–128.

38 KEMENOV 1951, 6.

39 See KODRES 2015, 118–135, here 120.

Western art historians for creating a model of art based on a presumption of linear development, viewing historical styles as parts of a chain that do not derive from society but simply successively from one another, presenting the history of art along with all the different manners of depiction in that history as a step-by-step progressive and natural development.

Another publication of significance from a discursive point of view was Soviet art historian German Nedoshivin's (1910–1983) collected edition *Essays on Art Theory*, published in 1953.⁴⁰ In the sections *Art and Social Life* and *The Problem of Realism in Art* Nedoshivin, a researcher at the Academy of Social Sciences of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Академия общественных наук при ЦК КПСС), apart from dealing with other issues concerning Socialist Realist art, discusses art as a means of reflecting reality. It is not possible here to analyze all his theoretical discussions over 340 pages, but the reader will easily detect that the author repeats familiar lines of thought, emphasizing realism as the only way of depicting the world objectively, i. e. truthfully. This means condemning all other historical and contemporary styles as reflections of false consciousness.⁴¹ In the longest essay in his book, which specifically concerned itself with the topic of realism, Nedoshivin presents a list of examples to demonstrate how to apply the Marxist-Leninist method correctly in the treatment of the art of past historical periods. In the essay, realism appears as a critical tool for use across the whole of history, a benchmark in relation to which all other expressions in art and society can be judged and measured.

MODERNIZING THE SOVIET DISCOURSE OF SOCIALIST ART HISTORY

Let us now move forward in time. The first public signal of the Thaw was proclaimed to wider society at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956. Although questioning of Stalinist cultural policy and of the doctrine of Socialist Realism had begun much earlier – indeed the first objections began to emerge immediately after the death of the “Great Leader” in 1953⁴² – it was not until after the 20th Congress that public criticism began to be allowed. There might have been many discrepancies across the different intellectual communities in Eastern Europe, but – as the various authors of our collection demonstrate – the entire Socialist bloc, art historians among others, were to respond to this fundamental change.

40 Within the next years, numerous republications of the book followed. The book grew out of university and public lectures, which NEDOSHIVIN (1953, 5) had read in Moscow since 1946. – It was at least partly also translated to German: NEDOSHIVIN 1955.

41 NEDOSHIVIN 1953, 13. – Cf. Carmen Popescu, *Writing in the Void: The Historiography of Modern Architecture in Socialist Romania*, and Marina Dmitrieva, *The Riddle of Modernism in the Art Historical Discourse of the Thaw*, in this book.

42 ZEZINA 2014, 193–208, here 198.

The initiators of the process of de-Stalinization in the arts and humanities of the Soviet Union were mostly writers, philosophers and aestheticians. In 1956, an extensive discussion took place at the A. M. Gorky Institute of World Literature (Институт мировой литературы им. А. М. Горького) of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in Moscow on the topic of realism, followed by lively disputes on realism that went on for an entire year in the weekly *Literaturnaya gazeta* (Literary gazette). Among the contributors to the controversy was the above-mentioned German Nedoshivin, who characterized his time as a period of “hangover after the reign of dogma and violence”, though he nevertheless continued to defend his position, which he characterized as “extended Socialist Realism”.⁴³ Also among the historians, some critical voices were heard to cast doubt on the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of historical materialism.⁴⁴

1956 was also the year in which an “aesthetic explosion” took place.⁴⁵ Whereas up until the Thaw, the discipline of aesthetics was usually regarded as the equivalent of a single “general art theory” in the Soviet discourse, now at least three different perspectives on philosophical aesthetics emerged. The first of these was the “objective–subjective” view, which saw the aesthetic experience as dialectical relationship between subject and object – thus denying the possibility of “objective” aesthetics. Secondly, there was the “natural-scientific” posture, which claimed that aesthetic perception was bequeathed to man via evolution, that it is a law of nature. A third opinion, formulated by a group of aestheticians-social activists (*общественники*) represented the view that the field of aesthetics is social in character, that it depends on social conditions and culture, and reflects a particular set of criteria of evaluation.⁴⁶

This view inevitably led to the conclusion that there can in reality be no universal aesthetic assessments with the capacity to endure over time. For example, Moisei Kagan (1921–2006), later a leading aesthetician in the Soviet Union, presented a paper in 1956 in Tbilisi (Tbilissi), at a preparatory meeting for the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Artists to be held in Moscow in 1957, in which he questioned the predicates of the Socialist Realist method. He came out with a thesis based on the inseparable unity of form and content. Thus, according to Kagan, form cannot contain anything that has not been determined by the content. Obviously, this did not correspond with the Stalinist formulation that art should be Socialist in its content and national in its form (i. e. that they would logically have to differ), but rather gave way to the conclusion that

43 MOTYLEVA / ZISS / NEDOSHIVIN 1957, 35–51, here 40.

44 KROM 2016, 59–74, here 60–61.

45 Allegedly not a single study devoted to aesthetics had been published in the Soviet Union between 1937 and 1953 (STOLOVICH 1999, 109). – Cf. SWIDERSKI 1979.

46 STOLOVICH 1999, 132–135.

every form (or style) is an expression of its content (that is itself a synthesis of both the national and international context).⁴⁷

At the end of the 1950s, Soviet art historians began to tackle the issue of realism as it related to the interpretation of historical art. Looking more closely at the formation of the canon in the Soviet centers, one can see that tensions were already becoming evident in various articles in the journals *Iskusstvo* and *Tvorchestvo* (Creation), but their full vigor was revealed in the collection published in 1959 on the initiative of the Institute of Art History of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, *Against Revisionism in Art and Art History*.⁴⁸ The very titles of the opening article by director Igor Grabar (1871–1960), *Realism Will Live Forever*,⁴⁹ and the one that followed it by Nedoshivin, *Marxist-Leninist Art Theory and the Tasks in Fighting Bourgeois Aesthetics and Revisionism*, make it quite clear what kind of views were being defended in them. Over 26 pages, Nedoshivin examined the irreconcilable differences between Socialist Realist art (including the history of art) on the one hand, and its bourgeois rivals on the other. He concluded that Socialist Realism was the one and only mode of art capable of revealing objective truth in the progressive Socialist world order. Socialist Realism was in his view characterized by art's closeness to the party and to the people, by its historical optimism and ideological humanism, whereas revisionism was essentially the radical antipode to such features. Nedoshivin makes the usual move of pairing off capitalism (or the bourgeoisie) with "formalism". Formalism allegedly reproduces demoralization of consciousness and society, because it lacks any kind of optimism. The despised revisionists at the same time stress the unity of contemporary world culture, in other words they do not depend on any differences in social order. Nedoshivin also characterizes the revisionists as denying the principle of art's party spirit (*партийность*), accusing them of subjectivism, of mysticism, and of the epigonism of bourgeois-decadent art. According to his account, besides their error of promoting the formalist manner of depiction, revisionists also committed the sin of trying to do away with the insuperable watershed between realism and formalism.⁵⁰

Curiously, in the article – in which Nedoshivin also writes a history of the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s from a Marxist-Leninist position – he makes an attempt to convince the reader that experimentation and subjectivism in art are to be regarded as natural phenomena in Socialist society, defending it as a "perfectly normal process of the development of realism".⁵¹ He thus passionately condemns the views of bourgeois

47 See BERNSTEIN 2009, 366–368 (translation of BERNSTEIN 2008). – See Talvoja and Dmitrieva in this book for a longer discussion.

48 KALASHNIKOV / NEDOSHIVIN 1959.

49 GRABAR 1959, 7–9.

50 NEDOSHIVIN 1959a, 9–35, here 15.

51 NEDOSHIVIN 1959a, 29.

theoreticians, according to whom both Soviet art in its manner of depiction, and Soviet art history in its evaluations had become stuck in the 19th century.⁵²

In the same year of 1959, Nedoshivin published another article in the more liberally-minded *Tvorchestvo*, in which he posed the problem of the “watershed” between realism and formalism in a different way. He concluded that there is no need to leave stylization and expressive deformation in the sole possession of bourgeois art, because such modes of depiction can also be used to enrich Socialist Realism.⁵³ In this context, it is worth mentioning another important publication: *The Fundamentals of Marxist-Leninist Aesthetics*,⁵⁴ which was first published in 1960 with contributions from the leading Soviet aestheticians and art historians, representing all the crucial institutions in the field. As a whole, the publication – with careful reading – demonstrates the same discursive split among the experts, which also concerned how one should understand realism and how it should be applied in addressing historic art.⁵⁵

We can therefore say that a clear shift in the field of art history had become obvious by 1959: apparently all the leading art historians of Moscow and Leningrad had become divided into two opposing camps – the dogmatists and the revisionists – at the 7th plenary session of the board of the Artists’ Union of the USSR.⁵⁶ It should be mentioned, however, that the Soviet brand of art historical revisionism was a relatively moderate and cautious version. One of the leading art historians of the Socialist bloc at the time, Boris Vipper (Boriss Vipers, 1888–1967), for example, wrote an article in 1962, *A Few Theses on the Problem of Style*, in which he underlined the well-known view of the old classics Marx and Engels that economic conditions have no immediate influence on art. From this Vipper deduced that era and style should not necessarily be expected to correspond to one another – i. e. the meaning of style does not always have to coincide with the social content of the ruling socio-economic formation.⁵⁷ Also in the collection published in 1964, *Contemporary Art History Abroad*,⁵⁸ several prominent Soviet authors displayed more moderate views in their criticism of “bourgeois art history” than had been the practice a decade or so earlier.

Commenting on the many metamorphoses that had occurred in approaches to Socialist art and art history, professor emeritus Jaak Kangilaski (b. 1939), then researcher at University of Tartu, has rightly observed that the concept of realism was not abandoned entirely in the course of this shift in the Soviet Union. Rather, the scope of realism was

52 NEDOSHIVIN 1959a, 26–27. – He refers to a review by the German literary historian Manfred WINDFUHR 1958, 472–475.

53 NEDOSHIVIN 1959b, 14–17, here 14–15. – See REID 2016, 267–295, here 288.

54 BERESTNEV / NEDOSHIVIN 1960.

55 DMITRIEVA 1960, 232–306.

56 CRITICISM 1959, 6–9; KANGILASKI 2003, 11–24, here 22.

57 VIPPER 1962, 11–12. – See KODRES 2015, 126.

58 VIPPER / LIVANOVA 1964.

expanded so that it now reached into what had previously been conceived as “non-realist” periods in the history of art, including the eras of Gothic architecture or Romanticism, for example. This in effect meant that every time an art historian tackled a particular period or work of art, he or she had the task of proving that it contained certain elements of realism. At the Soviet center – i. e. in Moscow and Leningrad – he tells us, art historians and aestheticians (Moisei Kagan is mentioned as an example) had to check their rhetoric with particular care, whereas in Soviet Estonia, for instance, there was more room to criticize the Socialist Realist doctrine.⁵⁹ This also well exemplifies the different contexts in which the various East European art historians operated.

The greater freedom allowed to the “periphery” enabled Boris Bernstein (1924–2015), lecturer at the State Art Institute of the Estonian SSR (Eesti NSV Riiklik Kunstiinstituut, now the Estonian Academy of Arts) in Tallinn, for instance, to publish an article, *Regarding the Disputes over Realism*, in two issues of the journal *Kunst* (Art) in 1966–1967. Bernstein thought it pointless to extend the boundaries of realism: he disputes art’s gnosological nature, emphasizing that art does not present an era’s “objective” content, and asserting that art is inevitably judgmental. According to Bernstein, there is a balance between the subjective (idealistic) and objective (realistic) manner of depiction, the dominance of which has alternated throughout the history of art. He highlights that realism has not always been regarded in a positive light, and that all other artistic methods (he is referring to styles) have been historically justified.⁶⁰

As for the Soviet dogmatists, it should be said that they kept an eye on the “revisionists” in all countries of the Socialist bloc. For example, Nedoshivin’s list of revisionists included East German sculptor and critic Fritz Cremer and philosopher Wolfgang Harich, and even one or two Chinese scholars, adding also that “in regard to representatives of the old Polish, Czech and Hungarian creative intelligentsia, the process of re-education is far from over”.⁶¹ Soviet art magazines also followed the debates on art history as they happened in the “fraternal Socialist republics”, in general paying most attention to authors who focused on realism, and Socialist Realism in particular.⁶² It becomes obvious that this habit of keeping a watchful guard over one another – and not for the purposes of gaining new knowledge – was a characteristic pattern of behavior of all publications in the Socialist bloc, ranging beyond periodicals.

59 KANGILASKI 1965, 1707–1718; KANGILASKI 2003, 20–21. – In his argumentation, Kangilaski quotes OVSYANNIKOV / RAZUMNYI 1965, 133 (translation of OVSYANNIKOV / RAZUMNYI 1963).

60 BERNSTEIN 1967, 1–14. – Cf. KANGILASKI 2003, 23–24.

61 NEDOSHIVIN 1959a, II.

62 Among others, a commentary about the discussion on realism, conducted by the leading art historian Jaromír Neumann in the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, was reproduced in *Iskusstvo* (REALISM 1963, 77). See Bartlová in this book for details. – See also the Russian translation of East German art historian Ullrich KUHIRT 1970, 39–42 and 36–39.