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The fringes in and of art historiography in post-1945 Europe

Review of:

Noemi de Haro García, Patricia Mayayo and Jesús Carrillo (eds.), *Making Art History in Europe after 1945*, New York/London: Routledge, 2020. ISBN 978-0-8153-9379-6. (Hardback) £ 120; ISBN 9781351187596 (eBook) £ 33.29

Arnold Witte

In recent historiography, the internalist approach – whereby a discipline is largely viewed as driving its own development by means of consecutive methods originating in a dialectical or progressive process – has largely been supplanted by an externalist view. The volume reviewed here also takes as its starting premise the idea that the discipline is determined by external factors, predominantly political circumstances; it sets itself the task of investigating how politics in post-1945 Europe has affected the field of art history. It intends to take a 'decentred' perspective and focuses specifically (but not exclusively) on the fringes of the continent: in this case, the eastern and southern regions. Or, in terms of political geography – in which the nation state is viewed as caught between the often conflicting demands of international relations and regional or social movements – it highlights the role played by former Communist countries and erstwhile military (fascist) regimes in the dynamics of the post-1945 world order.[1] What kind of discourse on art and its history was developed under these circumstances, and how does it relate to the field as a whole?

On another level, the volume currently under consideration sets out to expand upon the sources of art historiography – by taking into account the fact that the sites where the history of art takes shape include not only books and articles, but also exhibitions. In so doing, it ties into a current strand of research on the exhibitionary complex and the importance of exhibitions as a means of communication.[2] Moreover, it is, to an extent, forced to do this, as, under authoritarian regimes, subaltern stories of art and artists were rarely documented, regardless of their political position or artistic characteristics. Published documentation of an official, academic kind is, therefore, often non-existent and this is a way of working around these limitations. Furthermore, the compass of this book includes, not only art history as a discipline, but discourse on the arts in general – thus including criticism and cultural policy.

[1] For the conceptual framework of political geography, see John Rennie Short, *An Introduction to Political Geography*, London: Routledge, 1993.
[2] See Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics*, London: Routledge, 1995; Jeannine Tang, "On the Case of Curatorial History," in Paul O'Neill, Mick Wilson, and Lucy Steeds, eds, *The Curatorial Conundrum. What to Study? What to Research? What to Practice?*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016, 97; see also the Exhibition Histories Series of Afterall Books.

The result is an intellectual journey through time and geopolitical space, and across disciplines. This trip starts with a section under the slightly puzzling heading, 'Europe after the Rain' (presumably referring to Max Ernst's 1942 painting of the same title)[3] with chapters on Germany, France, the UK and Italy in the immediate post-1945 context. It continues with a second section on 'Re-reading Cold War Narratives', in which Yugoslavia, Portugal and Greece after ca. 1955 are discussed, and the book ends with a section, entitled 'A New Europe,' on the post-1989 situation in Spain, Estonia and Poland. The structure of the volume is, thus, mainly in chronological order, but does not attempt to systematically map the European situation, and (apart from Jachec's straightforward historiographical chapter on the intersections between political history and the history of art in Europe) leaves undiscussed at a more general level if, and how, these two historical turning points of 1945 and 1989 apply logically to each of these countries.[4]

Cultural politics and art historiography

The first section of the book ('Europe after the Rain') focuses on the geopolitical 'centre' of the continent. The contribution by Walter deals with post-1945 Germany as a 'battle-ground' of cultural diplomacy on the part of the USA, the UK, France and the Soviet Union, in an attempt to 'educate' the Germans by means of their art. This meant, on the one hand, the organization of exhibitions of contemporary art and, on the other, active support of certain artists' movements – for example, Socialist Realist artists in the Soviet zone, particularly after 1948, or modernist abstraction in the Allied zones. These developments also led to re-interpretations of pre-1933 art; while Soviet-zone publications on socialist realist tendencies in art identified its roots in previous centuries (and beyond Germany), for example, in Goya and Courbet, the western Allies used the history of art to justify abstract tendencies. However, most of the discussion is dedicated to exploring how living artists were either stimulated or hampered by the respective policies of the occupying forces.

The other contributions in this section deal less explicitly with art historiography – for example, Perry's discussion of UNESCO's Colour Reproductions Program, which issued photographic reproductions of (predominantly French and European) modern art to be sent around the world as 'imaginary museums'. The program aimed at the diffusion of western art across the rest of the globe and can thus be regarded as a cultural imperialist policy which must have impacted art historiography along the fringes of Europe and far beyond. But, alas, this impact (and the resulting processes of canonization) is not discussed

[3] Ralph Ubl, *Prehistoric Future: Max Ernst and the Return of Painting between the Wars*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, 172-91.

[4] See Federico Romero, 'Cold War historiography at the crossroads' in *Cold War History* 14:4, 2014, 688-89, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2014.950249; for a discussion on the general applicability of periodizations, see Julia Secklehner, 'Moving times, moving spaces. Conference report on 'Questions of Periodization in the Art Historiographies of Central and Eastern Europe', *Journal of Art Historiography* 2020, number 20, JS1, https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/secklehner-report.pdf

here. Nor does Baeza Ruiz's discussion of director Philip Hendy's rehang in the National Gallery in 1946-51, strictly speaking, constitute a historiographical essay, since it discusses how this was intended to attract another kind of audience – he aimed to contribute to cultural dissemination amongst the lower classes. But, by replacing a strict chronological and national order with an aesthetic approach, in the form of 'daring juxtapositions', it also highlighted artistic relations between various countries. This approach was inspired by the cultural policies of bodies such as the Fondation Europeenne de la Culture, which aimed to cultivate a transnational view of European culture – something which was also at play at the National Gallery.[5] This latter issue (and thus the larger geopolitical context) is left undiscussed here, though, as is how this new display was related to developments in art history as a discipline – a widening of the discussion here to include the impact of post-war formalism and the aesthetic view on the work of art would have been a logical development.

Finally, Colicelli Gagol and Martini's discussion of the Biennale's institutional impasse between 1948 and 1968 also follows the discourse of cultural policy – but with an emphasis not on its contents, but on its administration and organization. From the point of view of art historiography, though, it is puzzling to read here that the 1948 Biennale presented a 'politically neutral' edition by adopting a formalist approach with a focus on quality, thus purportedly keeping politics at bay. One wonders why the authors ignore the literature on the political implications of art historical methodologies, especially those claiming to be 'scientific' and thus 'objective', and the inherently problematic relationship between notions of quality and discourses of hegemony.[6] The conclusion drawn here – that the 1970s Biennales were politicised by the choice of social laboratories and, in the 1976 edition in particular for its thematic focus on Spain in the year immediately following Franco's death – shows a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of the authors of the ways in which politics could and did influence art history as a discipline in the period after 1945.

Art historiography at the geographical fringes

A significant number of contributions to this volume can be considered art historiography in the stricter sense and they are included in the second part, on Cold War Narratives. These chapters offer interesting insights into how differing

[5] Werner Haftmann, 'Einheit und Vielfalt der europäischen Künste', in *Proceedings of the congress of the Fondation européenne de la culture*, Amsterdam: Fondation Europeenne de la Culture, 1958, 16-29, in which he argued that art should be utilised on a supranational level in the service of peace, which was one of the main goals of the European Cultural Foundation – see also Arnold Witte, 'The myth of corporate art: the start of the Peter Stuyvesant Collection and its alignment with public arts policy in the Netherlands, 1950–1960', *International Journal for Cultural Policy* 2020, 7, https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2020.1746291.

[6] For political interpretations of formalist reasoning, see Mitchell B. Frank and Daniel Adler, eds, *German art history and scientific thought. Beyond formalism*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, and Evonne Levy, *Baroque and the Political Language of Formalism (1845-1945). Burckhardt, Wölfflin, Gurlitt, Brinckmann, Sedlmayr*, Basel: Schwabe, 2015.

political situations impacted the practice of art history, especially on the periphery of the continent. For example, the chapter by Adamopoulou presents an ideal illustration of what the ostensible approach of the volume is able to achieve. It argues convincingly that the post-1945 political situation in Greece led to the reformulation of a national identity which was to firmly position the country within the European realm and, for that reason, attempts were made to construct a history of art that reinforced these European connections. It resulted in the institutionalization of art history as a discipline in its own right in Greek academia – clearly separate from the archaeologists who had previously dominated the field, and breaking with their focus on classical art as the essence of Greek identity. The goal of these new departments was to carve out a history of post-classical art in Greece which highlighted Christianity, downplayed possible 'foreign' (i.e. Ottoman) influences, and thus aimed to study the continuity of Greek artistic currents in comparison with those in the rest of Europe, but which could, at the same time, be constructed as 'national'. This materialized in a renewed flourishing of the study of Byzantine art – complemented in 1964 by an exhibition in Athens, supported by the Council of Europe – and in the adoption of western European methods, such as Wölfflin's formalism.[7]

An interesting fact, not discussed here by Adamopoulou, is that this particular approach was also adopted by Greek private collectors, many of whom began acquiring Byzantine objects (recently presented in a 2013 exhibition held in Washington and Los Angeles, promoted by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture), in order to support this vision.[8] Since the Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki was envisioned as early as 1913, despite not being realised until 1994, and that the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens was founded in 1914, the construction of a new national identity based on this particular era of Greek history was already underway well before 1945, prior to the institutionalization of art history in the country. Adamopoulou also leaves undiscussed the other side of this geopolitical coin, namely the fact that the European Union and its predecessors have *never* regarded Byzantine art as an integral part of European culture. Significantly, this period is not currently represented in the House of European History in Brussels, which aims to demonstrate the unity within European culture. Considering this, one might even wonder about the possible political implications of this fact: can any connection be drawn between this exclusion of Greek Byzantine art from European art historiography and the treatment of Greece by the EU during the 2008 credit crisis?

The chapter by Hanaček on the reception of realist art in Yugoslavia provides another example of an artistic milieu which is situated midway between the Eastern European context and the Western bloc. Here, socialist realist works of art produced immediately after 1945, conforming to Soviet regulations, were

[7] Evonne Levy and Tristan Weddigen, eds, *The global reception of Heinrich Wölfflin's "Principles of art history"*, New Haven/London: Yale, 2020, alas, does not deal with his reception in Greece.

[8] Anastasia Drandake et al., *Heaven and earth. Issued in conjunction with the exhibition "Heaven and earth : Art of Byzantium from Greek collections"*, 2 vols., Athens: Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports/Washington: National Gallery, 2013.

consciously ignored in discourse on Yugoslavian art after 1948. This was a result of Tito's breaking with Russian cultural policy in that same year, which led to a new autonomy in the arts and an acceptance of abstract tendencies in Yugoslavia. It subsequently led to the dismissal of works produced between 1945 and 1948 as an 'irrelevance' and to the marginalization of socialist realist tendencies in discussions of Yugoslavian art – including discussion of works produced before the war, in the 1920s.[9] However, Hanaček's chapter then moves from its narrative of (academic) interpretation to an interesting, but somewhat traditional, discussion of the artists and their works, concluding with an analysis of the cultural policy of the young Yugoslavian state and the role of art in its political propaganda. As such, this chapter presents a sound art historical article on a certain group of artists with an extensive historiographical introduction, rather than taking a truly historiographical or discursive approach to the subject.

Blurred chronological boundaries

In the third section, on Europe after 1989, Talvoja's chapter illuminates the complex relations between centre and periphery in post-1945 art history in Estonia. In this case, the focus is on the assumed relationship between Estonian art and the unofficial art of the Soviet Union. The main focus of this chapter is the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University in the USA, where a collection of 'dissident' Russian art was in 1991 amalgamated with a collection of post-1945 art from Estonia. These two holdings were shown together in a 2001 exhibition, thereby imposing the highly specific categorization of 'dissident', often applied to the former, onto the latter. The retrospective interpretation of particular anti-communist trends in Russian art (initially labelled 'unofficial', they were later reframed in a more political sense as 'nonconformist' or 'dissident') has had a large impact on the framing of Estonian art – both in Estonia itself, and in the United States and Canada, where this tendency emerged concomitantly with the fall of the Iron Curtain. As a result, Estonian art and artists were subsumed under the heading of 'resistance' (against the Soviet occupation), a categorization which has in the last decade been adopted by quite a number of art historical studies and works of art criticism.[10]

But, after 1989, Estonian art historians initially negated the comparison with the Russian context as an explanatory model, insisting that official Soviet cultural policies had not applied in their country. Instead, they argued that Estonia was influenced by western (i.e. capitalist) developments through publications on western art, leading to discussions of Estonian art between the 1950s and 1980s as

[9] Ivana Hanaček, 'Artists in service of the masses. The untold story of the Yugoslav Socialist Realist project' in Noemi de Haro Garciá, Patricia Mayayo and Jesús Carrillo, eds, *Making art history in Europe after 1945*, New York/London: Routledge, 2020, 103-4.

[10] Talvoja here refers to the publication by Peter Fritszche, 'On the Subjects of Resistance' in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, 2000, 147, but more recent art historical publications following this trend include, for example, Christine Macel et al., eds, *Global(e) Resistance*, Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2020 (accompanying an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou), and Deborah Ascher Barnstone and Elizabeth Otto, eds, *Art and resistance in Germany*, New York etc: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019.

'repro-avantgarde' – modelled on western examples. It was only much later, under the influence of international – i.e. American – tendencies, that the concept of 'unofficial' art (but not the much more loaded concept of 'dissident art') was adopted by Estonian authors.

Analogies may be drawn between the Polish situation and that in Estonia – according to Leszkowicz's chapter on gender in Polish art historical discourse. Here it is pointed out that the emergence of a feminist approach in both art history and curation was facilitated by the relative accessibility of western culture, which meant an awareness of western discourses on art was developed, not only through the medium of publications, but also through artists and curators traveling across the Iron Curtain in both directions. However, references to western authors since the 1970s do not indicate straightforward opposition to the social and political ideology of the former communist state. Indeed, there was awareness of issues such as gender equality and, in consequence, a growing willingness to pay attention to female artists, in Communist Europe, as well, albeit – as Leszkowicz also points out – primarily as a result of female artists organizing informal (and thus sparsely documented) exhibitions.[11] The complexity of the pre-1989 situation resists the application of 'western' terms to an 'eastern' situation, but, in due course, the terminology of the former has nonetheless gradually become accepted by present-day Polish academia.

Thus, choices made in national art history can be seen as strongly determined by international political contexts, and regime changes present major ruptures in regimes of art historical interpretation. The chronology here becomes somewhat blurred – since the fall of the military regimes in Southern Europe happened in the 1970s, while Communism only disappeared from the scene in 1989. Thus, the question arises whether these regime changes and their impact on the discourse on art can be compared at all and, if so, what conclusions may be drawn from this comparison. What it also shows is that centripetal forces could work in more than one direction under the influence of the Cold War – pulling both in the direction of the Western Allies and in that of the Eastern (communist) ones, and not always in a predictable way. Often, the situation of art history as practiced in the capitalist West versus the communist East was not simply dialectical, but rather more complex and fluid. It, finally, also highlights that the fall of the Iron Curtain has not interrupted this tendency to judge the art of smaller (and peripheral) countries by comparing it to that of the nearest large one – and it indicates that the impact of a Cold War which divided the continent into two distinct geopolitical spheres can still be felt to the present day.[12]

[11] Brigitte Studer and Regan Kramer, 'Communism and feminism'in *Clio. Women, Gender, History* , 41, ("Real socialism" and the challenge of gender), 2015, 126-139; Nanette Funk, 'Feminism and Post-Communism' in *Hypatia* 8:4, 1993, 85-88.

[12] For the general issue of the method of comparison in art history, see the recent volume by Jas Elsner ed., *Comparativism in Art History*, London/New York: Routledge, 2019.

Conclusion

Research on the history of art history along the geographical borders of Europe has undeniably received increasing attention in recent decades.[13] This book is different from earlier publications, in that it not only focuses on art historical methodological developments in the post-1945 period, but also prioritizes artistic currents of the latter half of the twentieth century – and, from that point of view, takes into account criticism and cultural policies. However, by widening to a more general 'discourse' on the arts, it also fragments the field. This leads to contributions that often disregard the impact of one field (such as art history) on another (such as cultural policy), where a focus on the exchanges *between* those realms would have led to really enlightening insights into the relationship between the arts and the geopolitical situation in the post-1945 period.

Moreover, one would expect this book to provide a reflection on whether different countries shared tendencies in their discourse on art, or whether they, instead, followed different routes, as a result of political alliances or hostilities. In other words, one wonders up to what point art history and criticism in Europe were shared practices and which contextual factors supported this. On this issue, the volume really disappoints its reader, since the developments of art history and criticism are mainly discussed within their respective national boundaries. Quite a few contributors (especially those writing on the Iberian peninsula) seem to consider their country as an island, in which political and intellectual developments took place in isolation from the rest of the world. In most of the other contributions, the USA and Soviet Russia linger menacingly in the background, but to the detriment of the European context. It is left to the reader to consider issues of exchange between North East and South West, North West and South East, or, in other words, between the central and peripheral traditions in European art history.[14]

This might also be due to the fact that there is a lack of reflection of the prior context – to what extent, *after* the rupture of the Second World War, did these diverse countries take the same academic and/or critical framework as their starting point? Here, recent literature on the spread of German concepts of formalism in the occupied territories, or the spread of the Vienna School throughout Eastern Europe, might have provided some insight into these shared concepts.[15] A real omission of

[13] For example, Jerzy Malinowski ed., *History of Art History in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe*, 2 vols, Torún: Tako Publishing House, 2012; Jan Bakoš, *Discourses and strategies. The role of the Vienna School in shaping central European approaches to art history & related discourses*, Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2013; Galina Mardolovich and Maria Taroutina, *New narratives of Russian and East European art between traditions and revolutions*, London/New York: Routledge, 2020.

[14] There is quite a body of literature on the concept of centre and periphery in art history; see Enrico Castelnuovo and Carlo Ginzburg, *Centro e periferia nella storia dell'arte italiana*, Turin: Officina Libraria, 2019 and Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Towards a Geography of Art*, Chicago/London: Chicago University Press, 2004, 97-99, for more references.

[15] Magdalena Bushart, Agnieszka Gasior and Alena Janatková, eds, *Kunstgeschichte in den besetzten Gebieten 1939-1945*, Cologne/Weimar/Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2016; Bakoš, *Discourses and strategies*; and Matthew Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History. Empire and the Politics of Scholarship, 1847 – 1918*, University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2013.

the book is, therefore, broader, supranational and transnational views of art and its history, applied as they have been to the period prior to 1945. In sum, this book highlights an interesting omission in art historiography, and sets a new agenda in decentralising the approach of art historiography by shifting the focus from a regional to a geopolitical perspective. But it has failed to convincingly fill this gap, largely because of the inclusion of other discourses, such as art criticism and cultural policies, inevitably leading to a fragmented and, at times, superficial view of how politics influences the discourse on the arts.

Arnold Witte is associate professor at the department of Arts & Culture of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Amsterdam. He is specialized in institutional patronage in the early modern period (especially ecclesiastical patronage) and the present day (particularly focusing on corporate collecting), and has also published widely on art historiography, especially on the reception of the Baroque in the early 20th century.

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