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The Past and Present of (Multi)Media
Art in Central and Eastern European
Countries - An Outline

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The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

Ryszard W. Kluszczyński

The Past and Present of (Multi)Media Art in Central and Eastern European Countries - An Outline

The history of avant-garde media art using moving pictures as the means of expression in Central and Eastern European countries is over 70 years old. Obviously, such experiment in the media artistic creation were dominated by film people, who often referred in their work to their experiences in the field of photography. In the first half of the 1970's video art began to develop parallel to film experiments. With time, this parallelism was imbalanced, and, gradually, video art assumed a dominant position (to a different extent, however, in different countries). In recent years another transformation has been observed, resulting in the increasing interest of both artists and their audiences in interactive media art, placing its subjects in virtual reality and employing the communication potential of Internet. The historical analysis presented here arises from a conviction that the present standing of (multi)media artistic culture in Central and Eastern Europe cannot be fully understood if it is referred to only in its technological context and political environment. The diversity of its forms and manifestations as well as the dominance of certain tendencies is also a result of historical inspiration. To some extent earlier achievements determine the shape of the present even in those fields of artistic creation which are commonly regarded as the embodiment of modernity and, somewhat naively, linked solely to the future. Even in the era of global communications we have our roots, not only aerials. As a matter of fact, it is also possible that the "historisation" of the present, understood in different ways, is a feature characteristic of the (multi)media culture of Central and Eastern European countries.

1

The history of experimental cinema in Central Europe began in the 1920's. In

that period the interest of avant-garde artists in cinematography was mainly manifested in writing (theoretical and critical texts, film projects, screenplays, etc.): it was not until the late 1920's and early 1930's that actual film-making activities in that part of Europe were initiated. In Russia, experimental tendencies began to develop earlier, from the second decade of our century. Initially, they focused mainly on the area of documentaries films, which was mainly due to Dziga Vertov. Working only with real, documentary material, Vertov made it subordinate to the properties of the film media, in particular the movement and editing which organised it. In the 1920's the trend of avant-garde narrative cinema emerged (Sergei Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Aleksander Dovzhenko), arising from the foundation of constructivist ideas, and experimenting with editing in the first place, as well as the trend of film 'eccentricism', related to Russian futurism (Grigori Kozintsev, Leonid Taruberg, Sergei Yutkevych). In Czechoslovakia, the avant-garde aesthetics of film can be traced mainly to the artists of the "Devetsil" group, with Karel Teige publishing numerous critical and theoretical texts on the cinema. Fundamental to that aesthetics was the conviction that the two basic features of the cinema which built the poetical dimension of film works were light and movement. In reflections by Czech artists, inspirations taken from constructivism (supplemented with the tendency to use real material) intermingled with those of surrealism, which in that country assumed the form of poeticism. Despite the presence of other elements in discussions on film (for instance, the cinema as visual music), it was poeticism which was acclaimed as the main principle of the cinema, with so-called visual dramatism as the form of its expression. The expected result of that combination of preferences for real material with poetical tendencies, accomplished by transforming documentary records into visual poems was "intensified equivalent to the poetry of the flow of life" (Teige). It was from that mode of thinking that the avant-garde Czech cinema of the 1930's emerged, with films by Alexander Hackenschmied, Cenek Zahradnicek, Jirzi Lechovec, Otakar Vavra, and others. In Poland, after a period of lively although purely theoretical interest in film (closest to practice were two authors of film projects, Mieczysław Szczuka and Jan Brz+kowski), a period began when theoretical discussions met with practical realisation. Responsible for the creation of avant-garde Polish cinema, along with auteurs of single films, such as Jalu Kurek, Janusz Maria Brzeski and Kazimierz Podsadecki, were in the first place Franciszka and Stefan Themerson. Between 1930 and 1945 they made 7 films (the last two in Britain during the Second World War). The Themersons' film strategy was marked with particular interest in the substance of the picture. They used to define filmmaking as "creating visions". In their film works they used results of previous photographic experiments. They also devoted

much attention to the issue of equivalency between the visual and the musical layers, which together made up the structure of the film. An artistic outcome of this interest was *The Eye and the Ear* (1944-5), among other films. The Themersons inspired and accomplished various initiatives aimed at supporting the film avant-garde in Poland, such as the first-in-the-world association/co-operative of independent filmmakers, the "f.a" periodical, and presentations of experimental French and British films. The reflection on the nature of connections between film and music gave birth to an idea of abstract film by Onufry Broniseaw KopczySigmanski. As he saw it, movie film should be treated as a score, and the film itself performed, instead of just being shown. With this theoretical assumption, the area of creative film work was extended, as not only the process of filmmaking as it was traditionally understood but also its presentation was recognised as a phase of artistic creation. The showing of the film became its interpretation, and the projectionist turned into an artist. That vision of a film as a score interpreted by its author by means of a tool such as a projector was a presage of later experiments by artists associated with the expanded cinema circles. In Hungary, the interest of the avant-garde in the cinema also began with theoretical publications by such artists and theoreticians as Bela Balazs, Erno Kallai, Alfred Kemeny, Kornel Melleky and Georgy Gero (regarded as the first independent filmmaker in Hungary). Particularly important in the presentation of the idea of film experiment was the role performed by the "MA" ("Today") magazine published in Vienna. Its editor-in-chief was Lajos Kassak. It was there that the first articles by Hungarian authors on avant-garde cinema were published, including the full version (with illustrations) of the script by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, entitled *Sketch for a Film: Dynamics of a Big City*. Moholy-Nagy was the most prominent personage of the Hungarian avant-garde. He employed numerous media in his work, including photographs taken with and without a camera. For him, light was crucial in visual creation. From his perspective, the cinema was primarily the art of light projections. As A result, Moholy-Nagy became one of the precursors of the 'extended cinema'. He built a device known as *Lichtrequisit* (or *Licht-Raum-Modulator*, 1922-1930), which was used in numerous live shows and was employed in the making of a film entitled "*Lichtspiel: schwarz-weiss-grau*" (1930). Moholy-Nagy was also the auteur of other films, where he investigated the issues of movement perception and articulation. The most important period in his artistic career was the time of his association with the Bauhaus. Among other artists who made their film projects and experiments in the field of light kinetics in the Bauhaus circle were Sandor Laszlo (the designer of a device for light projections, Vilmos Huszar and Gyorgy Pal. In Hungary, creative film work

was carried on by Erno Metzner and Janos Manninger, as well as other artists.

2

During the first years after the Second World War, the nationalisation of both film production, and, even more importantly, filmmaking as an artistic activity (by its submission to ideological control, which at the same time imposed a particular artistic programme, that of socialist realism) distorted the development of experimental tendencies in the countries subject to direct domination by the Soviet Union. Only some films made in the first post-war decade proved that the avant-garde attitudes did not vanish without trace, but remained hidden, waiting for a change in fortune. Better times began in the 1950's, with the political thaw after Stalin's death.

Among those who were the first to take advantage of the more favourable climate were artists in Hungary, Yugoslavia and Poland.

An event crucial to the development of the avant-garde cinema was the establishment of Bela Balazs' Studio (BBS) in 1959, at which a lot of attention was devoted to film experiments. The artists who in the 1960's made their experimental films there were Janos Toth and Zoltan Huszarik. At the same time, although outside an institutional framework, Miklos Ederly made his first films. The most important of all BBS' initiatives in the field of experimental film was the Film Language Series, initiated at the beginning of the 1970's. It was connected with the activities of the "K/3 Section", a group of artists who consciously referred to the film facet of Bauhaus in their work. Among those who made their films within the FL Series were Gabor Body, Dora Maurer, Zoltan Jeney and Andreas Szirtes, as well as the above-mentioned Ederly and Toth. An important feature of the Film Language Series Productions was their intermedial character, arising from the fact that they were a result of contacts between artists representing different areas of art. That interdisciplinary contact was also helpful in the film reflection on the properties of the cinema as such, and on audio-visual communication, constituting another relevant characteristic of films by the K/3 group. In Poland, worth mentioning are Kineforms created by Andrzej Paweowski in the second half of the 1950's, experiments in the domain of light kinetics, as well as the inception of the experimental trend of animated films, the works of Jan Lenica and Walerian Borowczyk being the most interesting here. In 1970, a Workshop of Film Form was established in Wroclaw, the most significant of all artistic formations in the Polish cinema of the post-war period. The main representatives of WFF were Jozef Robakowski, Ryszard Wayko, Wojciech Bruszewski and Pawee Kwiek. The members of the Workshop proclaimed the need to investigate the properties of the film media. In their works they analysed the character of

film perception and inner connections between various levels of the film structure; studied the issues of the relation between reality and its audio-visual representation, as well as between the spectator and reality, and its representation.

Differently understood issues concerning the connection existing between the picture and sound, as well as between the mechanical character of the media and psycho-physiological nature of its user, were particularly frequent in the films by Workshop-based artists. It is worth mentioning here that the WFF artists manifested specific fluxus-like attitudes, which to a large extent determined the shape of their artistic activity, often directed against lack of authenticity in various forms, shallowness or masquerade in the world of art by means of provocations, unmasking or discreditations. From the foundation of WFF experiences developed the art of Zbigniew Rybczynski. He created his genuine, distinctive style using mainly an optic photocopier and colour filters; experimented with picture formats and combined traditional animation with processed live action. In 1983, Rybczynski won an Oscar for his *Tango* (1980) in the category of animated films. Other Rybczynski's films made after he had left Poland, such as *Steps* (1985), *The Fourth Dimension* (1988), *L'Orchestre* (1990) and *Kafka* (1992) confirmed his position of one of the most prominent artists in the field of experimental cinema and video art in the world. In Yugoslavia, the first important avant-garde films appeared at the beginning of the 1960's. In that period, as well as in the following decade, a number of centres were created, including MM in Zagreb or SKUC in Belgrade, whose scope of interest included, among other genres, the experimental film. Among the most innovative artists in that field were Ladislav Galeta and Tomislav Gotovac. Poland, Hungary and Yugoslavia were the only countries of the Eastern bloc ('Eastern' being a political term), where in the 1970's the avant-garde cinema evolved and developed, reaching international standards and gaining world-wide recognition; as far as other states are concerned, we can speak only of individual artists. In Czechoslovakia for instance, after 1964 Jan Svankmajer began making experimental animated films related in their form and content to the surrealist ideology of the pre-war period. In the 1980's experimental filmmaking gradually declined, forced out by video art. In Hungary this process was far less intensive (if we can speak of it all), as video there accompanied film art, which was still continued. In the mid-1980's in Russia, where video still remained a thing of the future, a group of artists led by Igor and Gleb Aleinikov initiated film experiments (parallel cinema) using the experiences of FEKS' expressionism and eccentricism, having labelled their

style "necrorealism". Video art in Russia emerged later than elsewhere in Central Europe and, was parallel to the trend of alternative cinema.

3

Video art in Central European countries began to develop in the 1970's. In Poland, it emerged from the experiences of WFF artists (Bruszczyński, Kwiek, Robakowski), who became the first independent users of the tools of electronic creation. Because of this context, Polish video art of that period (just like the film) assumed an analytical character. The works created in the 1980's were more personal in character, more expressive and symbolic, and often had the form of video performances (to the camera). Of particular importance at that time were works by Zbigniew Libera and Jerzy Truskowski. The present decade, due to artists such as Barbara Konopka, Maciej Walczak, Jacek Szleszyński or Piotr Wyrzykowski, appears as the era of multitude and diversity of individual choices, attitudes and poetics. The beginnings of video art in Hungary are connected primarily with Gabor Body, the first one in that country who in the early 1970's started to use video for artistic purposes. In the early 1980's he was a co-founder of "Infermental" - an international avant-garde magazine, a Polish-Hungarian joint venture. The further development of video art in Hungary was limited because of a slowly improving access to video equipment, and the sluggish development of education in the field of video techniques, which began as late as the mid-1980's. Because of such unfavourable conditions in their own country, the most eminent Hungarian artists worked abroad, and their works were presented mainly during festivals, both domestic and foreign. This phenomenon constitutes one of the most important differences between Polish and Hungarian (probably also Yugoslavian) video art. In Poland, artists came to terms with the limited technical capabilities they had at their disposal, and managed to establish an independent network of locations (mainly private, although some galleries were also included there) where video art was presented in the difficult period of the 1980's (see the "Silent Movie" Festival). In Hungary, artists sought institutional support: if not able to secure it, the most prominent of them decided to work abroad. Extremely significant were Yugoslavian achievements in the field of video art, where this discipline developed from the early 1970's. The most prominent of them, which gained international recognition, were created by Sanja Iveković, Dalibor Martinis, Breda Beban, Hrvoje Hrovatić, Marina Gržinić and Anna Šmid. Considerable interest in video art was displayed by television stations in Ljubljana, Skopje, Zagreb and Belgrade (where in the years 1982-1990 Dunja Blažević had her TV Gallery). A continuation of this Yugoslavian tradition is the interesting video art of Slovenia and Croatia. From the early 1980's, the emergence and fast development of video art in

the Baltic Republics and Ukraine can also be observed. The process began with Latvia, mainly due to the Video Centre established in Riga, and the international Arsenal Festival, whose first (and the most interesting) presentation took place in 1988.

4

Since the beginning of the present decade in Central European countries freed of the corset of dependence on the falling Russian Empire various initiatives have been undertaken with the aim to support the development of the culture and art of the new media. Needless to say, the situation is different in different countries, just as different are their traditions in that sphere. Even on the basis of the above analysis, by no means a detailed one, an observation can easily be made that the most noteworthy achievements in various periods appeared in that countries where in the previous decades valuable phenomena in the domain of media art occurred, and where that artistic activity resulted in the emergence and grounding of permanent tendencies. Strong experimental film in Poland, Yugoslavia and Hungary created the environment from which different video trends have surfaced. Because of the lack of such formative factors in Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, the development of video art in those countries was considerably delayed. The question whether a similar pattern in the relation of video and multimedia will occur, remains unsettled for the time being. At present in nearly all countries of the former Eastern Bloc a significant enlivening in the sphere of (multi)media culture can be observed, with a number of varied initiatives undertaken. In Poland in 1991 the author of this outline organised a retrospective of avant-garde cinema and video from Central European countries, held in the Centre for Contemporary Art, "The Middle of Europe", where the most valuable projects in that field were presented. Consistently, in subsequent annual exhibitions of media art, the productions by artists from Middle and East European countries were confronted with those from elsewhere in the world, including Michael Bielicki, Gabor Body, Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, Gustav Hamos, Sanja Iveković and Dalibor Martinis. These confrontations provided material for the author's opinion that historical experiences in the sphere of media art in various countries to a large extent determine the artistic choices of today's. An excellent example here are the multimedia realisations and projects of a Polish artist, Piotr Wyrzykowski, who in his attitude combines in a most interesting way the conceptual inspirations originating in the 1970's with those of performance art of the 1980's. Such a combination, rooted in a historical context, seems a characteristic feature of the most distinguished manifestations of the new media art in Poland, irrespective of their diversification. Subsequent presentations of the WRO Festival in Wroceaw

seem to prompt similar conclusions. Still, the growing interest in (multi) media art in Poland and the increasing activity of artists (especially of the younger generation) find no institutional support. There are places when such productions can be presented, but education in this area is underdeveloped, and there are hardly any critics who specialise in (multi)media art, or who are experts in that field.: the same small group of people organises exhibitions and carries out educational activities. Institutions are generally not willing to support (multi)media productions, which are more and more expensive, and demand technological aid. Independence, which often takes the shape of private production and presentation, and which used to be an advantage and strength of Polish video art of the 1980's, has become, in a sense, its weakness and a hindrance in the era of interactive computer installations and virtual reality. In a sense, because I am not fully convinced that dependence on various institutions can solve all problems and create a perfect environment for the artists. There is no doubt, however, that the present situation calls for solutions aimed at guaranteeing artists the possibility to carry on their work without interfering with their preferences and choices. In the author's opinion the situation in this respect is better in Hungary, where the tradition of institutionalising artistic activity does exist, as well as the possibility to use for didactic purposes the experience of artists who have worked abroad (e.g. Gustav Hamos and George Legrady). The scale of the latest artistic venture undertaken there, *The Butterfly Effect*, as well as some other events (such as international seminars on art in cyberculture), deserves attention and praise. Of extreme importance to the present and future of multimedia culture in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc is the network of Soros' centres. It was due to SCCA that the already mentioned undertakings could occur, just like exhibitions and seminars held in capital cities of Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. *Ex Oriente Lux*, Bucharest 1993; *New Media Topia*, Moscow 1994; *Orbis Fictus*, Prague 1995-6). Financial support here is extremely important; however, of equal (if not primary) relevance is SCCA's help in establishing and setting in motion a network of contacts, international exchange and co-operation. Without them, the bringing into existence of any venture not limited to the mere presentation of finished works, even if of limited durability, would be extremely hard to accomplish. The activity of Soros' centres can prove to be a factor having a positive influence on the development of new multimedia culture in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, for instance speeding up the process wherever no well-established traditions of media art exist, or where the underdeveloped system of institutional support is incapable of satisfying artistic needs. Obviously, a preliminary condition in this case is the emergence of groups interested in the development of media art. Their

existence has already been confirmed by the intensity of response elicited by the undertakings mentioned above, as well as by the multimedia projects and achievements of artists from countries without any particular past accomplishments in the field of electronic artistic creation (such as Tatyana Detkyna from Russia and Alexandru Patatic from Romania). Still, the most interesting ideas by artists from countries of the former Eastern Bloc remain in the sphere of projects rather than their actual realisation, which is mainly due to technological difficulties. Such a situation, however, will not last long: as the growth of an electronic industry in these countries is very dynamic, results, favouring artistic creation, are likely to be seen soon. Last but not least, the time when the use of the labels "the art of Central and Eastern European countries" or "the art of the former Eastern Bloc" was justified and appropriate, is coming to an end. The years following the victory of the Solidarity Union in Poland, and the demolition of the Berlin wall were a period of differentiation, when the situation in each of these countries acquired an individual character. Although similarities are still many, we should not be deceived by them, as the differences are far more important. The status of multimedia art varies in each country, and future developments will depend on local artistic traditions in the first place, the tempo of technological progress, support granted by state agencies and institutions, a favourable political environment, and, most of all, on the activity of artistic formations, groups and communities.

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